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Author's Note

Hello, lovely reader!

Welcome, and thank you for being here! It has been a long time coming, but I FINALLY am taking the time to give Mistpelt the time to shine!

WARNING BEFORE I SAY ANYTHING ELSE: If you have NOT read my Warrior Cats fanfiction series - Kittypet Clanborn - I STRONGLY recommend that you read that first, as it definitely adds a bit more substance! However, it honestly could be vice versa if you decide to read this first, haha!

But anyway, Mistpelt was basically a side character with some pretty strong moments in my fanfiction series, and she is the mother of the main protagonist of the series - Lilypetal. These strong moments of hers in the series imply QUITE the past for her, and I decided a long time ago that I really wanted to tell her full story in the form of a super edition.

My GOODNESS, has this book had quite the journey. I actually started writing this book YEARS ago when I was probably twelve years old? I think I was in the middle of writing *Warriors #2: Warrior Rising*, when I decided that it would be a good idea. But my GOSH, was the book so bad. It was poorly written, rushed, and just... dumb. Any of you all that actually got to read that "original" edition would understand that I'm not even trying to be self-deprecating when I say those things about it.

But after all of these years, I want to correct my mistakes and tell Mistpelt's story in the way that the queen deserves, and I REALLY hope that you all will enjoy it!

- @warriorcatlover345

Prologue

[image]

I had returned to my real home, and I was ready to finally leave my past behind me.

I had never seen this place before in my life – fields with hills and horse stables that eventually turned into oak and pine forests, all surrounding a blue lake that glittered in the sunlight – but at the same time, I had never been so certain that this is where I was meant to go.

ThunderClan was just pawsteps away.

I then shut my eyes for a moment, suddenly having to push down violent feelings of grief and overwhelming sadness. *I found ThunderClan for us, my lovely daughter. I wish you were here to experience it with me...*

I had spent what felt like seasons trying to find them, after what felt like seasons being away from them. *After discovering that they were no longer in their old territory felt like a physical blow to the heart... let alone actually being taken away from them in the first place...* I thought, my fluffy white chest out as I scanned my surroundings. *But I could not have even begun to guess where they went had I not spoken to Barley and Ravenpaw.*

I silently thanked the two kind toms in my head, my heart suddenly feeling as it was soaring above with the birds as I began to pad along the lake as quickly as I could. I knew immediately that I was likely not on ThunderClan's territory by the lack of trees and the hills beyond. *With that in mind, StarClan forbid that I don't get caught here...*

But despite that thought, I tried to remain calm, preparing to face any possible hindrance as I quickened my pace. *And hopefully my moons and moons of fighting skills didn't diminish after being a kittypet for moons and moons...*

And by the time that I actually reached the forest I'd been able to see when I first arrived to the lake, my heart was pounding with so much excitement, nerves, and exhilaration that I thought I was going to disintegrate and then drift off into the wind. *If this is where the Clans are, I would bet on my life that this is where ThunderClan would settle,* I told myself as the shadows of the trees ahead began to loom over my fur. *This has to be it, oh my goodness...*

And I only got further confirmation of my thoughts as I fully padded into the trees – feeling the soft grass and soil beneath me, seeing the spiky bramble bushes scattered everywhere...

And catching scents that smelled so strangely foreign, but were so comforting and familiar at the same time. I recognized that earthy, leaf-like smell. *ThunderClan cats...* None of them were completely fresh, but I could be certain that a patrol had likely gone through this area earlier.

I then shut my eyes, nearly letting out a whimper as I became overwhelmed with emotions. The one place in my life where I had felt truly happy; the place where I felt that I truly belonged and that had once felt impossible to find again, was just within reach. No matter how many times I thought about it, it made my stomach flutter in the exact same way.

I then opened my eyes and forced myself to take a deep breath and begin walking again, but my heart still raced like it never had before. I realized that I now needed to be extra focused – *I need to find their camp... hopefully that won't be hard. Or would it be too alarming for me to simply walk into their camp? Would many cats recognize me? Are cats like Sandstorm or Willowpelt even there? Is Firestar still leader?*

I then took another deep breath in an attempt to calm myself down. *All of your questions will be answered soon, and no matter what, I hopefully will receive a warm welcome...*

Feeling a bit more reassured, I began to pad more lightly through the forest, trying to follow recent cat scents to the best of my ability and trying to plan what I would say or who I would ask for once I made it to their camp.

But I then paused, my ears pricking with alarm as two new, and two very fresh scents suddenly flooded through my nostrils. And it wasn't until this moment that I was able to process the footsteps that I heard in the distance.

Although running into a patrol was almost even more convenient for me, I still instinctively leaped into some bramble bushes, trying to hide myself as best as I could. Even though I'm pretty certain of where I am, I still don't want to guarantee that this is ThunderClan territory necessarily... I told myself, crouching low and trying to keep my fur flat. And even if it is, I don't want to alarm whoever these cats are.

I then had to keep myself from shifting in surprise as the footsteps got even closer, and I actually heard a voice that I didn't recognize, speak. "What is it?" the voice, a she-cat, nearly whispered.

I then flicked my ears once again as the other cat replied – this voice actually sounding somewhat familiar to me, but I couldn't quite grasp who it was immediately. "I smell cat..." this cat, a tom, muttered in response to the she-cat.

I then screwed my eyes shut, holding my breath. *I wonder who that cat could possibly be...?*

I then took a long, almost silent breath as I tried to figure out what I should do. *Do I hide and wait this out, so that I can just make my entrance into camp later... or do I reveal myself and hope that that familiar voice is indeed someone that I know?*

To be honest, I barely got any time to even make a decision.

Before I could even think to dodge and defend myself, I was completely toppled over by another cat and was pinned down. My initial startled yelp at the attack then turned into a yowl of pain once I felt the cat's big, sharp claws sink into my shoulders. *Great StarClan, has my pain tolerance gone down since I became a housecat!*

The pain gave me all the drive I needed to try and take a swipe at my attacker. But the cat above me then jumped off of me almost as quickly as he had leaped on to me, his claws still unsheathed as he

backed away.

I jumped up to my paws and shook out my fur, bracing myself just in case he decided to leap at me again.

And honestly, he would have been able to bowl me over all over again as the shock of who I realized I was looking at finally sunk in.

And the tom in front of me clearly recognized me too, opening his mouth to speak but then closing it again as he stared at me with wide, round pale blue eyes. "*Mistpelt!?*" the tom then exclaimed.

I blinked several times, shaking my head in disbelief before pelting up to meet the golden brown tabby tom in front of me. "Thornclaw!" I nearly cried, meeting him and touching my nose to his without even thinking. I already felt an immense amount of weight lift off of my shoulders with just this little encounter.

Thornclaw – one of the youngest warriors in ThunderClan when I had first been snatched away from them – wasn't a cat that I had been close to at all, but he had always seemed to be highly respected while I was there. He was brave, noble, loyal, and even had a stubbornness and hot-headedness to him that was actually charming, in a way.

And he was also quite the sight for sore eyes, and for a cat that had been away from ThunderClan for so long. "What are you doing *here?*" he then asked me excitedly as we pulled away from each other. "That Twoleg took you and your kit away *moons* ago!"

I rolled my eyes and sighed in reply, so relieved that I finally was getting to share my situation with an outsider looking in... and a former *Clanmate!* "Oh, I was taken to some awful Twoleg den, and let me tell you, was trying to escape quite the effort! But I knew that I was going to do all that I could to find my Clan again," I began to explain, my heart soaring once again as I scanned my eyes all around the forest. "I then found my way to Ravenpaw and Barley – StarClan bless those cats. They sent me in the direction you all had supposedly gone, and I *prayed* to StarClan that that was enough to find ThunderClan again, and I ended up here!"

I then let out a huff, practically having to catch my breath by the time I was done talking. *I suppose that saying so much at once, and also not talking so much for days will do that to a cat...*

I then looked back up at Thornclaw, flashing him a bright look as he also shook his head in disbelief. "That's great!" he meowed warmly to me. "It's been so long! The Clan will be so happy to see you back!"

I had to close my eyes again, letting the happiness and satisfaction that those words brought me sink in for just a moment. "I hope so!" I then replied, my eyes opening once again. "I had originally traveled back to the old forest territory, but it was *completely* destroyed. I was worried that all of the Clans had disappeared forever!"

I then felt my stomach flutter once again as I took one more look around the forest. "I knew that I shouldn't have lost hope..." I then nearly whispered.

I then was surprised to look back at Thornclaw to find that his pale blue gaze had darkened significantly, and I anxiously awaited what he would say next. "Did... did you ever find your kit?" he eventually meowed, his voice barely a whisper.

Suddenly being hit with another overwhelming wave of sadness, I screwed my eyes shut once again and lowered my head as it shook slowly. *As much as I hate being asked this, it's a relevant question. The cat most precious to me just had to be taken along with me when that sick Twoleg took me away from ThunderClan, and then it separated the two of us... I will never fully get over that loss, among others...* "No," I eventually forced myself to answer, my voice unintentionally shaking. "I haven't seen her since we were first taken away. They tore us away from each other, and I have *no idea* where they took her. The Twolegs-"

I then cut myself off, finally processing the fact that another cat had been standing next to Thornclaw this entire time – the cat that I presumably had not recognized the voice or scent of. In my excitement of recognizing Thornclaw, *I completely forgot that there had been another cat with him, my goodness... and she will surely be*

very confused by who I am and what I'm saying right now.

I then shifted my gaze towards the stranger, ready to apologize and more formally introduce myself after finishing my explanation to Thornclaw.

But I found that when I only gaze landed on the stranger, I could barely speak at all. "The Twolegs..."

I then completely trailed off of my words, suddenly feeling as if I was either hallucinating, or in some parallel universe as I got a good look at Thornclaw's friend. For a moment, all I could do was stare at her through wide eyes and try to convince myself that I wasn't going crazy, and try to convince myself that the she-cat I was looking at wasn't too good to be true.

But I couldn't take my eyes off of her when I spoke next, suddenly feeling as determined as I had been trying to escape my Twoleg nest. "Thornclaw, who is this?" I muttered, almost at a whisper.

My stomach then twisted as the brown-and-white tabby she-cat looked alarmed for a moment, clearly realizing that I was staring at her, but then proceeded to stare right back at me and not look away. I then felt as I could have ascended into StarClan as I looked into those she-cat's eyes – *that captivating, beautiful eye color that reflects the sun, the grass, and the soft soil alike... the eye color that means so, so much to me, and that I haven't seen anywhere else, except...*

I then fell completely speechless just as Thornclaw was beginning to finally answer me. "Um... this is Lilypaw," he answered, clearly noticing the sudden mood change as he shifted uncomfortably. "She lived with Twolegs in a nest for her whole life, but she joined ThunderClan a few sunrises ago."

As if I wasn't certain enough already, Thornclaw's words definitely sealed in my suspicions.

And as I continued to stare back at this *Lilypaw*, trying to fight back emotion with all of my might, my heart nearly skipped a beat as I realized that her beautiful gaze of worry and confusion had

completely gone away, being replaced with as much warmth and certainty as I certainly felt.

No words needed to even be said – it was almost as if the strong connection the two of us once shared had only been building up and sustaining after all of this time, causing this she-cat to recognize me despite her being taken away from me at just two moons old.

Despite that, she continued to stare at me with warm, wide eyes as she took a step closer to me. "M...Mother?" she then whispered, her voice quivering.

And with those words, I couldn't hide my immense feelings of complete joy and exultation anymore, running forward to touch my muzzle to Lilypaw's head. "Wrenkit!" I cried, not being able to help calling her by the name I had originally given her. *And the name that I prayed to StarClan about every single night after I lost her...*

And almost as if we had done it so many times before, Lilypaw then began to purr loudly as she dug her head into my muzzle. *Oh my goodness, what did I do to deserve a moment as wonderful as this?*

I could barely control my own purrs as I then wrapped my long, fluffy tail around the she-cat's back. "I can't believe it's you!" I then whispered happily, still feeling like I was in a dream and was going to wake up in unfamiliar territory at any moment. "You're here, in *ThunderClan*, and you're *safe*." *All I had hoped for is that you were alive, and the fact that you also found your way home is beyond comprehension... but how?*

Just as I was about to press my long-lost daughter with an infinite amount of questions, Thornclaw suddenly caught my eye again, who was simply watching us with happiness glowing in his pale blue eyes.

I then forced myself to pull away from my daughter, and she did the same, clearly thinking the same as I was. *We will answer all of the questions and more later...* I told myself eagerly. I then glanced at Lilypaw, and then at Thornclaw, simply giving them both a nod. *For now, let's go home.*

Then, without any other words exchanged, the three of us nearly broke into a run, me following closely behind the two Clan cats as they led me to what I assumed would be the ThunderClan camp.

My heart continued to soar as I continued to run. *Thank you, StarClan.* I thought, closing my eyes and pausing in my steps for a moment as Lilypaw and Thornclaw ran ahead of me. *Thank you, thank you, thank you. After all that I've been through, I am glad that you believe I deserve this.*

Chapter 1

[image]

"I can't do it!"

My legs were shaking so much that I thought that I would fling off of the rock I was standing on. I then completely closed one of my eyes, slowly stepping forward and trying to peer over the edge.

I squealed at the sight, jumping back to my old spot. "Ah, I can't do it!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the dark, dusty gray fluffy pelt of my father, Sparrow, approaching, his dark gray eyes glowing with amusement as I attempted to peer over the edge again. "Mist, it's okay," he meowed to me softly, giving me a reassuring nod. "Take a deep breath."

He then sniffed and rolled his eyes after I attempted just that. "A *real* one," he then purred. And after I took a moment to inhale more slowly, with my exhale sounding more like a frustrated huff, Sparrow went on. "Don't worry, I'm right here to catch you if your jump is lopsided."

"Okay..." I breathed. Starting to feel more encouraged, I gave my father an excited nod before trotting closer to the edge. "Okay!" *I can do this! I can do this!*

But as soon as the edge of the rock came into my sight again, I let out another squeal, cringed back, and covered my eyes with one of my paws. "Father, I can't!"

I stayed there with my eyes shut, now not just nervous because of my task of jumping off of the rock, but I was scared that Sparrow would begin to grow mad at me with how long I was taking.

However, just like the calm, patient father that he was, he simply sighed, closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked back at me

warmly. "Mist, what do I always tell you?"

I slowly pulled my paw away from my face, staring back at my father with reluctant, nervous eyes.

So, Sparrow cocked one of his eyebrows, leaning his head towards me. "Replace the can't..." he began to murmur.

I let out a huff and sat down where I was. "Replace the can't..." I repeated sluggily.

When I didn't finish the sentence, Sparrow continued, raising both of his eyebrows. "...with a can."

"-with a *can*..." I finished, rolling my eyes.

Sparrow then let out a purr of amusement, giving me a sharp nod. "Right!"

I then closed my eyes, letting out another sigh, and letting those words sink in. "Father, I can."

"Right," Sparrow meowed warmly, continuing to nod as he slowly backed away from my rock. "You can do it, Mist."

This time, feeling more encouragement than ever, I began to knead my paws into the ground as I let the adrenaline and determination rush through my body. "Yes, I can do it!" I meowed enthusiastically, taking one more deep breath before bringing myself closer to the edge of the rock once again.

And this time, I decided to not look down at all. *I* can *look down, but I sure won't!*

I then simply took a moment to let the light breeze brush my fur and hopefully calm my fears just a bit. I then closed my eyes, took a single step back, and tried to imagine that light breeze carrying me as I then finally took a leap forward, only feeling a twinge of fear for the couple of heartbeats that I was in the air.

And almost simultaneously, I felt my paws land on the soft grass, and I don't think I had ever felt so accomplished in my entire life.

I then looked back at Sparrow to see his dark gray eyes glowing with warmth and pride. "Father, I did it!" I then squealed, running up to meet the tom.

I then felt the purrs that were rising in my throat become even louder as my father then nuzzled my head with his tail. "Yes, you did, Mist!"

Then, as he pulled me closer to him with his tail and began to nuzzle my head with his muzzle, I simply closed my eyes and continued to purr as my heart filled with so much affection. *Sparrow is the most patient and encouraging father that I could ever want!* I thought happily, looking up at my father to meet his bright gaze. *There is no way that I could have made that jump without him.*

Then, as the dark gray fluffy tom pulled his tail away, I let out another purr and nudged his foreleg with my flank. *But he's never going to know that!*

"What did Mist do?"

I then flicked my ears as a new voice came from just a few tail-lengths away, and I looked up, my heart continuing to flutter with excitement as I saw the white and dark ginger tabby fur of my mother emerge from some brambles with a large squirrel in her jaws.

I then watched as Sparrow let out another purr, running forward to meet the she-cat, touching his muzzle to her cheek, and then leading her over to the rock that I had just jumped from. "You'll never believe it, Chrissy – Mist made a spectacular leap from this rock!"

I then couldn't help but beam with pride as Chrissy let out a shocked gasp, her eyes glowing as she dropped her squirrel and padded up to the rock that just barely rose above the middle of her forelegs. She then looked back at me, astonished, with her beautiful eyes. "That is *amazing*, Mist!" She then excitedly trotted over to me and gave me a lick on the head. "*Wonderful* job. I'm sure you'll be leaping down and across the tallest trees and rocks someday."

As Chrissy then pulled away, I looked up at her and gave her several quick, enthusiastic nods. "I *definitely* will!" I nearly squealed, almost wanting to float up into the tallest trees and rocks as the excitement of my newest accomplishment and my parents' encouragement rushed through my bones.

And although I hadn't met many cats in my life yet, I feel like I could say that the both of my parents were two of the most amazing cats in the world, so praise and encouragement from them felt like nothing else. And as parents, they *both* made me feel so loved and protected, and were just two very incredible cats that I thought that any cat that crossed their paths would admire.

Sparrow, as anyone would see from his words before and after I jumped off of the rock, was an incredibly calm, noble, and patient tom, but was also so strong and encouraging. He was also handsome, dignified, and courageous, *and if I can be half of the cat that he is when I grow older, I will be happy!* I thought proudly. *And I'm almost the spitting image of him with my fluffy gray fur, though mine is lighter... but it's a start!*

And my goodness, was my mother the most incredible she-cat that I think that I would ever know. Chrysanthemum - or as my father liked to call her, Chrissy - was the most beautiful cat in the world to me, with her white and dark ginger tabby fur and strange brown-green-yellow eyes. But she was so bright, spirited, full of adventure, and so incredibly loving. No matter what I did, she seemed to always know what I was thinking, knowing when I was frustrated, worried or upset and knowing just how to fix it; always seeming to have the right words of encouragement to say to me or to Sparrow.

And to this day, I was so thankful that she and my father had found each other and had been able to give me such an incredible life so far that was so full of excitement and adventure.

I was only just shy of four moons old, but as long as I could remember, the three of us had always done nothing but explore – never settling down in one place and simply traveling through nature as we saw content. One night we'd maybe sleep under the tall trees of the forest, maybe one night we'd sleep on the tallest hill of the plains, or one night we'd maybe sleep in the darkness of a

cold cave. And during the day we would simply wander, not ever having a destination, so we were never lost.

We didn't have a true home, but as long as I had my parents, I didn't care, and I loved traveling the world with them!

And my parents seemed to be able to adapt to any kind of atmosphere they settled down in, but most of all, they had the most incredible climbing, leaping, and jumping skills that I had ever seen. According to both Sparrow and Chrissy, their parents, and then their parents, and then their parents and so on had been exactly the same – using their long limbs and being able to climb up to tallest trees with no problems, jumping from branch to branch, and also being able to jump from high rocks and make the perfect landing.

While I also already had the longer limbs that my parents had, I was nowhere *near* being able to do that yet. But I was determined to get there, and wanted to be just like my parents when I grew up. *I want to feel like I'm flying and leap through all of the trees in the forest!* I thought excitedly.

I then let out a small, amused purr as I looked back at the rock that I had just jumped from. *That is just the start! I* can *do it someday, and I* will *do it someday!*

I then looked back at my parents who were both still staring proudly down at me, their dark gray and hazel eyes glowing. *But for now, I can just watch mother and father do it!* "Um..." I then murmured, my paws beginning to shift back and forth.

And just by the look that my parents then exchanged between each other, I could already tell that they knew what I was thinking. "Yes, Mist?" my mother purred, stroking my cheek with her tail.

"Um... I know that I ask this a lot..." I then went on, my tail then beginning to lash back and forth as I kneaded my paws into the ground once again. "But could you both *please* do the really neat tree-climbing and jumping things for me again? *Please?*"

I then tilted my head to the side, confused as Sparrow then let out a

purr of amusement and flicked my mother's ear. "Hm, our daughter is very eloquently spoken, isn't she?"

Chrissy rolled her eyes, also letting out a purr as I laughed at my own weird word choices. "Well, what else would you call it, Sparrow?" she meowed with laughter in her voice, flashing me a reassuring look as she then excitedly ran over to the nearest tree. "I think that our races together up in the trees might as well be called really neat tree-climbing and jumping things!"

I then continued to let out *mrrows* of laughter as Sparrow then raised his eyebrows, running over to the tree right next to my mother's. "Oh, so does this mean that you're up for this?"

Chrissy then gave a sharp lash of her tail, lowering her belly as if ready to leap up to the highest branch of the tree in front of her. "Oh, I always am!" But she then looked at her mate up and down, her eyes narrowing. "Are you? You seem awfully daunted..."

Sparrow then let out a taken-aback huff that nearly made me want to roll over on my back with laughter. "What? Never!" He then imitated my mother, crouching down and beginning to lash his own tail back and forth. "You're on!"

"Hm, glad to hear it," my mother then teased before glancing back at me, her gaze now stern but pleading. "Mist, remember to *please* stay right there while we race, okay? I don't want to come back down first and find you gone!"

Sparrow then let out another huff. "I think that you mean that *I'm* going to come back down first and find you gone," he then muttered, winking back at me.

And as I let out yet another laugh, my mother let out a contemptuous grunt, taking a single step back. "We'll see about that, my love. You ready?"

Despite my father's challenges towards my mother, I looked back at him to see him staring back at my mother, his eyes glowing with affection and love. "Ready as I'll ever be," he meowed softly before also taking a pawstep back. "One..."

My heart began to beat faster with excitement as Chrissy crouched down lower. "Two..."

"Three!"

Then, after my parents' final chant, they both pelted up the tree in what felt like a half of a heartbeat, their pelts simply being a blur as they climbed up the trunks.

Then, almost just as quickly, I watched as Sparrow and Chrissy began to follow the same path that they always did when they raced among the trees – each of them on different trees but following a similar path. I didn't even know where to look as the both of them practically flew through the trees and leapt through the branches – already having passed by and circled around me several times.

Both of them were equally as amazing and agile as they leapt from branch to branch, and as much as I loved watching them, they also made it look so incredibly easy, and I wished so, so badly that I could be up there with them. *So, so badly!*

And I had never felt so much desire when I finally heard the first set of pawsteps land to the ground perfectly, and I turned around to see that it was indeed my mother that had finished her route first. I excitedly ran up to meet her, nuzzling my head into her fur and then following her gaze as she looked up at the trees, watching Sparrow finish up his version of the route. "Any day now, right?" she shouted up to him, causing me to purr with amusement once again.

"Oh, please!"

Just a heartbeat later, Sparrow also landed to the ground flawlessly, giving a shake of his fur as he ran up to the two of us. "My muscles are just a little stiff today."

"Hm..." Chrissy then grunted, brushing her tail along my flank before walking up to sit next to my father. "Then your muscles must be stiff every day, because that was no different than any time we've raced."

"And yet I've beaten you several times before," Sparrow then purred, wrapping his fluffy tail around my mother's back and pulling her closer to him. "However, I suppose that you did *pretty* well today. I see that your skills haven't faltered... *much*." He then gave her a wink and gave her a lick on the cheek.

Chrissy then began to purr as she leaned into her mate, with me simply watching as my heart warmed at the sight at the two of them. "Oh, come on," she then went on, her hazel eyes narrowing. "You spent that entire time trying to keep up with me."

Sparrow then rolled his eyes, his gaze now full of affection once again. "Ah, well... I suppose that you wouldn't be the *worst* cat to take after."

My mother continued to purr, leaning her head on her mate's chest. "Thank you, honey," she meowed softly. "You weren't so bad yourself."

For a moment, I couldn't even break into their conversation and continued to watch them, my heart now soaring into the sky.

Every day, I also was amazed by how much my parents seemed to love each other. While they showed me all of they love that they could ever give me, the love that they had clearly had for each other seemed just as strong as it had probably been when they first met. *They tease each other like they're best friends, can race together like they're kits, talk to each other about anything, and the way that they look at each other is immaculate...* I thought. *I hope that I find a tom someday that I can be like that with...*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts as my parents pulled away from each other, my mother nodding to me and my father as she glanced at the squirrel that was still lying on the ground beside me. "Well, now that all three of us have done our leaping and flying for the day, how about we take a rest and enjoy some delicious squirrel?"

I purred with amusement as Sparrow immediately gave a nod, nearly pelting over to the squirrel and settling down beside it. "No need to ask me twice!" He then glanced over at me and pushed the

new catch in my direction. "Would you like the first bite, Mist?"

As my mother then purred and ran over to join my father, I actually found myself backing away from the both of them – the excitement at the race through the trees I'd just witnessed still making my fur tingle. "Actually is it alright if you all just save a bite or two for me later?" I asked, one of my eyebrows raised as I then ran over excitedly to the rock I'd jumped off of earlier. "I really, *really* want to practice jumping some more. Is that okay?"

My parents both purred, exchanging yet another glance with each other before looking proudly looking back at where I stood. "Of course, Mist, that is fine," Sparrow meowed warmly before ripping off a large chunk of the squirrel and setting it off to the side. "That'll be here whenever you're done, and let me know if you need me to spot you again."

I jumped up and nearly squealed. "Thank you! I won't be long, I promise," I meowed excitedly as I then ran up to the side of the rock, and then used the boost of a smaller rock to get to the top. *I can do this!* I told myself as I then began to walk towards the edge of the rock that I'd been so terrified of earlier. *I can do this...*

I then slowly looked over to my side, my eyes slowly narrowing as my gaze fell on the larger boulder just next to the rock I was standing on. *I can do this...*

I then found my paws slowly padding over to the very side of the boulder. *I can do that... can't I?*

I then quickly glanced back at Chrissy and Sparrow to see the both of them deep into the squirrel and into conversation – their eyes glowing as they seemed to be joking with each other and talking about anything and everything as they always did. *They aren't paying attention to me...*

I then looked back up at the top of the boulder. *And they don't need to be, right?*

I then felt my heart begin to pound and soar as I continued to stare. *Just one step closer to being able to be high up in the trees and make the*

highest jumps!

Suddenly coming to a decision, I tried to steadily, strategically, and most importantly *quietly* find a way to get to the top of the boulder – finding parts that jutted out or were more indented-in. I tried with all of my might not to let out an alarmed squeal whenever one of my paws slipped.

I can do this. I can *do this...*

And to my own shock and surprise, I made it to the top in just moments flat without Chrissy or Sparrow noticing at all. *Oh my goodness, no way!*

I then excitedly tried to push myself to look over the edge of the boulder, but as soon as I did, I had to bite back another squeal as I scrambled back to my original spot. *Oh my goodness,* no *way!*

At that moment I had decided that this was absolutely too much, and if I was ever going to try and make this jump, I needed more practice and I needed Sparrow or Chrissy here to make sure I was safe.

And unfortunately, I needed them now more than ever when I actually slipped in the middle of my blind panic, one of my back paws slipping on the smooth rock as I had attempted to scramble away.

And this time, I actually did squeal as I seemed to then lose control of all four of my paws, causing me to lose my balance, fall off the edge of the tall boulder, and begin to plummet to the ground below.

Chapter 2

[image]

I let out a squeal that I thought would make me never able to speak again as I quickly fell closer and closer to the pile of rocks below. *No!* I thought in panic, flailing my paws around aimlessly, hoping that somehow I'd be able to grip onto something before my fur met stone. *It's useless! Oh, mother and father, I'm so sorry!*

I then screwed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the horrible landing I was about to make, when I suddenly felt a pair of jaws wrap around my body, violently catching me and pulling me out of the way. I quickly recognized the scent and long fur of Sparrow, his long neck fur brushing against me as he made he leap and then landed to the ground.

It almost felt too good to be true, and so incredibly lucky.

I was so overwhelmed with relief and shock that I felt I could barely move as he then urgently set me down on the grass. And before I could even try to get a word of thanks out, I realized that my father had made himself scarce – simply sighing and shaking his head before beginning to pace the area with his head down.

"Mist!"

I then flicked my ears in surprise as I heard my mother's voice come from the rocks that I had been just moments from plummeting into. I turned around to find her actually standing just next to them, her hazel eyes wide as she then ran up to meet me, her nose suddenly brushing against my flank. "Holy hares on a hill, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Between my mother prodding at my fur, and my own shaking, I felt myself nearly topple over as I sharply shook my head. "N-no, no!" I insisted to her. "I'm fine!"

Chrissy then stepped away from me, meeting my gaze with

panicked, uncertain eyes. "Are you *sure?* Are you absolutely sure?"

I then tried to stand up straighter, giving her several quick nods. "Yes, I promise!"

"Oh, thank goodness," my mother then breathed before sighing, sitting down, and closing her beautiful eyes. "Now I won't feel as guilty about getting after you..."

Oh, no... I thought, already feeling my head instinctively begin to hang down in shame as I felt my stomach drop. *Here we go...*

I then tried not to cringe back as Chrissy took a step closer to me, also sitting down as she hardened her gaze. "Mist, I don't think I need to tell you how dangerous that was, and how ridiculous it was of you to even think to jump off of that boulder," she meowed in a stern yet calm voice that almost felt worse than yelling. "That jump would be risky for a cat of any size, let alone yourself."

I then lifted mt head up in alarm when suddenly Sparrow, who had spent this entire time pacing, finally spoke and padded very quickly up to me. I then actually did cringe at the harshness and clear anger in his voice. "You're lucky that I spotted you just as you slipped off the edge," he nearly growled at me. "If I had glanced over just a moment later..." He then trailed off, screwing his eyes shut and lowering his head once again.

I nearly let out a whimper, hating to see the both of my parents so disappointed and upset. And while I had known the mistake I was making as soon as I slipped at the top of that boulder, seeing Chrissy and Sparrow look so distressed because of me is what made my regret and remorse fully sink in. "I'm sorry!" I practically cried out, my gaze flitting back and forth between both parents. "I was just going to jump off of the small rock again, but..."

I then briefly glanced back at the boulder, only feeling a little bit of desire and excitement as my gaze fell to its top. "I just wanted to try..."

I then looked back at my parents as I heard Sparrow let out a snort. "Wow, that makes it all better."

Chrissy then shot her mate a warning look, lightly hitting his shoulder with her tail. "Sparrow..." she muttered to him. And after he only sighed and began to pace again in response, I felt my head begin to fall again as my mother looked back at me.

But luckily now, her gaze was a bit softer. "Mist, I understand that, okay? I can imagine that watching me and your father up in the trees encourages you and inspires you, and I love that. You will be able to do that same thing someday, *but*..."

She then slowly walked up to me, letting her tail rest on my small shoulder. "Remember that you are still young, and you have to be patient and learn first. Does that make sense?"

I was absorbing every single word that my mother was saying, but simply gave her a slow nod in response.

Chrissy also nodded, and I finally met her gaze again to see nothing but warmth and a bit of urging. "Good," she meowed softly, running her tail along my flank. "From now on, please ask us for permission, and please, *please*, make sure that me or your father are watching before you decide to practice, okay?"

I then forced myself to take a deep breath, reassured by my mother's tenderness as I finally lifted my head to meet her gaze. "Okay," I breathed, rubbing my cheek against her tail. *That is fair. I just have to be patient!*

Chrissy then gave a single nod, her gaze warming even more. "Okay," she purred, her gaze holding mine for a few moments before she looked over her shoulder to my father, who was still pacing behind her. "Do you have anything to add, Sparrow?"

I then watched, slightly nervous but simultaneously amused as my father then abruptly stopped in his tracks and letting out a sigh. He then seemed to take a moment or two to contain himself before joining me and my mother once again.

Even then, he didn't say anything immediately as his tail lashed back and forth. My mother then flashed him a look full of sympathy and ran her tail along his flank, which seemed to bring him to

finally speak. He flashed his mate an apologetic glance before murmuring, "I'm sorry, I just..."

He then closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before going on. "Mist, you know that you could have been seriously hurt with that jump, right?" he then meowed more clearly, his gaze full of so much fear that I could barely stand to look at it. "You could've..."

He then let out a huff, my mother fully wrapping her tail around him as he struggled to go on. "Like your mother said, *please* make sure that we're watching before you decide to climb or make any sort of jump..." He then flicked his ears, his dark gray eyes beginning to widen. "Or hunt... or explore... or talk a walk, or do *anything* that may even be considered remotely dangerous. I can't even..."

I couldn't even bear to see my father go on and go on looking and feeling so distressed, so I began to shake my head as I ran up to meet him. "I will, I *promise*, I promise," I meowed fretfully, feeling overwhelmed with guilt once again. "I truly am sorry..."

As my father then met my urgent gaze, his own seemed to warm a little bit as he then exchanged a glance with my mother. "We know that you are, Mist."

I then closed my own eyes and sighed, only feeling just a bit of relief. *I may not be in huge trouble, but... my parents were upset with me, and that feels worse than getting in trouble...*

But my remorse quickly began to fade when I opened my eyes to then see my father glance back at Chrissy once again, his eyes now gleaming as he brushed her shoulder with his tail. "Hm, do you want to know something good that came out of this situation?"

My mother then gasped, looking completely appalled as she stared back at her mate. "Sparrow, what could that possibly be?"

I then furrowed my eyebrows, watching as Sparrow slowly leaned his muzzle towards Chrissy's ear. "I beat you at catching Mist," he then whispered.

I then rolled over onto my back, howling with laughter as my father gave me a wink, and my mother simply sighed and rolled her eyes. "Oh my goodness, whatever!" she meowed contemptuously. "Not everything is a competition, you know."

Sparrow then let out a purr, nuzzling his muzzle into Chrissy's cheek. "Says the loser."

Chrissy then proceeded to let out another sigh, only slightly pretending to be disgusted as she stepped away from him and walked ahead, the light of the sunset falling onto her dark ginger fur.

I then couldn't help but sigh as she then turned around, the sunlight now highlighting her face and her amazing hazel eyes. *My goodness, I hope that I can be as pretty as that someday...* "Hm, not for long," she then murmured as she looked back at my father, who was staring back at her lovingly.

I then watched as my mother turned, staring back at the sun as she took a few pawsteps forward. "Hm... it looks like we may need to find somewhere to settle for the night pretty soon..." She observed before looking back at the two of us. "Do we stay here or explore around?"

Sparrow then let out a contemplative grunt, walking up to join his mate and beckoning me to follow with his fluffy tail. "I don't know about you, but I personally don't want to look at that boulder over there ever again," he muttered, only half-joking as he then nodded to the forest ahead. "I'm fine with exploring if you two are."

While I rolled my eyes, Chrissy nodded and purred with amusement. "Oh, always!" she exclaimed before also looking ahead with her mate. "It looks like the trees begin to clear out ahead – let's see what's in that area."

I then let out a sigh as Chrissy then glanced back at me, taking a very deliberate step to her side, leaving a space between her and my father. "Mist – remember to stay between the two of us."

I nodded, rolling my eyes as I trotted up to the both of them. "I

know, I know," I mumbled.

Sparrow then sniffed, wrapping his tail around my back. "I'm sure that you do know, however, with how slippery you've become this evening, we are making *sure* that you know."

Then, after I let out a purr and my father ruffled my head fur with his tail, he let out a sigh and a sharp nod. "Let's go!"

I then let out another purr, walking just a bit ahead of my parents as we then began to travel through the woods beyond. *Let's go!*

~>~>~>~>~>~>~

"Hm... is this what you were hoping to find beyond the woods, Chrissy?"

I only briefly laughed at my father's comment as I stared in awe at the large structure in front of me. Its height seemed to stretch all the way up to the clouds that glowed in front of the setting sun, and it was made out of what looked like dozens of sliced tree trunks that had turned gray.

"What *is* that?" I whispered, my mouth dry from having it hang open for so long.

Chrissy, who had been circling around the front of the barn, trotted over to join me and my father. "I believe this is what I've heard other cats around here call a *barn*," she answered, her hazel eyes narrowed as she stared up at the large object. "I know that some Twolegs keep their animals in them, or just some of their junk. I've even heard that cats take shelter in them..."

My eyes widened at that last part. *More cats...?*

"But there really is no telling until we go inside..." Chrissy then muttered before slowly turning her head to look back at Sparrow and me, her eyes full of excitement and mischief. "What do you all say?"

I widened my eyes and gasped. "Let's do it!"

"Hold on," Sparrow meowed sharply, putting his tail in front of me. "Chrissy, what you say is true, but that is precisely why we should be careful."

Chrissy flashed her mate a reassuring nod. "I know, honey, and we most certainly don't have to go in," my mother replied, then walking over to one of the barn walls and brushing one of her forepaws against it. "And it seems like it may be a downgrade from settling down out here..."

She then let out a quick sigh, once again looking back at Sparrow and me. "But I figured we might like the new experience either way!"

I then excitedly and anxiously looked back at my father when I heard him let out a grunt, hoping with all of my might that he would agree with my mother. "You're not wrong..." he muttered after a few moments. He then glanced down at me, one of his eyebrows raised. "What do you say, Mist? Should we spend a night in here?"

"Please!" I then squealed as I began to jump up and down. "And I'm up for whatever we might find in there!"

"Okay, I wouldn't go that far," Sparrow then meowed, raising his tail in front of me once again. He then shifted his gaze to look back at Chrissy. "I will go in to make sure it is clear, and I'll let you two know if it's okay to go all of the way in."

Chrissy gave a nod to Sparrow as he then began to pad towards what looked like a small hole just large enough for a cat to crawl through and get inside of the barn. "I'm right behind you," she meowed briskly. She then began to follow her mate, pausing just a moment later and flashing me a sharp look. "Mist, stay there."

I simply nodded and sat down, watching anxiously but excitedly as my parents began to inch closer to the barn.

As he had declared to, my father lowered himself down to the hole first, only sticking his head through the other side while my mother stood right behind him. "Anything in there?" she whispered, looking

back and giving me a curious glance.

I then nearly let out a gasp as my father very quickly and abruptly backed away from the hole. "I definitely can scent cat in there, without a doubt," he meowed softly, exchanging a nervous glance with my mother. "But it's slightly stale – whoever it is hasn't been here all evening. Should we-"

"Well, hello there!"

I let out an alarmed gasp, immediately running over to stand in between my parents as a voice came from behind me, echoing through the forest.

And I simply watched, obviously very scared, but also very curious as I watched the shadow of a figure, cast by the setting sun, come closer and closer into view, eventually revealing a white tom cat that had black spots all over his fur. He looked to be young – just about the same age as my parents.

He didn't seem too surprised or scared that we were here, and only looked back at us with kind blue eyes. *Is he the cat that lives at this farm? Why isn't he scared of us?*

I continued to be shocked by the stranger's peaceful stance as my both my father and mother stepped forward, the both of them very strong-looking cats in my eyes. However, their own stances were relaxed, and their fur only seemed to bristle slightly. "Hello there," my mother replied, her voice actually quite warm and kind, but I could sense her wariness. "By any chance are you the cat that owns this farm?"

I tried to peer past her leg despite her attempts to shield me from the stranger. "As a matter of fact, I am!" he meowed kindly, walking up to meet the three of us and flashing each of us a warm look. He then gave a shrug and a sniff. "Well, I guess you could say that. I live here, but any other cats that stop by are welcome!"

Then, after me, Chrissy, and Sparrow exchanged a hopeful glance, the tom went on, his head tilted. "Were the three of you looking for some shelter for the night?"

Chrissy also gave a shrug, blinking sheepishly back at the tom. "Well, only if you could spare it?" she meowed. "We usually sleep out in the open in the forest or in the plains, but we figured that this might be interesting?"

The tom then let out a small purr of amusement. "If by interesting you mean *piles* of hay, stacks of wood everywhere, and mice scampering the barn like they own the place, then sure it is!" Then, after I let out a *mrrow* of laughter, flashing a pleading look to both of my parents, the stranger brushed past the three of us and stopped at the small entrance in the wall. "Well, come on in – plenty of room and plenty of food if you'd like some."

I then looked back at my father to just barely catch his gray eyes flash with relief. "Thank you very much," my father meowed warmly as he padded up to meet the tom. "By the way, what's your-"

The tom turned around to face us, stepping back and giving all three of us the kindest and most genuinely warm nod I thought I'd ever see a cat give. "My name's Barley," he replied, quick to answer what my father was surely going to ask.

He then stepped to the side of the hole, gesturing towards the inside of the barn with his tail. "Well, hurry up, get in! It's starting to get dark out."

At this point, I didn't think I could get in there any faster after my parents slipped through the small entrance, and I bolted through behind them like my life depended on it. *My goodness, my accident already feels like days ago!* I thought excitedly as I came through the other side, my mouth dropping as I took in the surroundings. *Now, I get to spend the night in the barn!*

Even though the barn was obviously a confined space, to me, it almost felt just as free and spacious as the largest field of hills. The top of the barn seemed to raise just as high as it did from the outside, making me feel just as small as the mice that apparently scampered around here.

The barn had many levels, and seemed to have a structure that led

to higher levels of the structure where cats could go. There were some small holes at the top that let the rising moon leak through, and the smell of hay flooded through my nose – an oddly comforting scent. *Wow... I think a barn is something that I never knew that I needed... this is amazing! And Barley lives here all of the time?*

I looked ahead at my parents to see them also taking in the surroundings. Sparrow's mouth was gaped open as he looked up, and was clearly taking in all of the new scents, while Chrissy had already seemed to spot a small mouse near a stack of hay. She only briefly stalked after it before giving it an intentional scare and allowing it to scamper away.

Barley simply watched the three of us from afar, sitting patiently with his tail wrapped around his paws. "So, may I ask for your names? I don't need your life story in order to stay in here, but I'd like to know what to call you!"

Sparrow pulled himself away from his inspection of the farm, letting out a quiet purr of amusement. "I don't blame you – I suppose that's important," he meowed warmly as he padded up to Barley. "My name is Sparrow, and..."

Sparrow then looked back at my mother, who was now making her way to join the two toms. "My name is Chrysanthemum," she meowed kindly as she then flashed my father a warm and teasing look. "But you can call me Chrissy."

"Oh, great. I was going to say, that's quite the mouthful," Barley meowed teasingly before nodding to me. "And what about this enthusiastic, brave little one?"

Both Sparrow and Chrissy looked back at me with pride as I excitedly ran forward to join all three of them. "This is our daughter, Mist," Chrissy meowed, flicking one of my ears with her tail. "Enthusiastic and brave indeed, Barley – she's been practicing her leaping and jumping today like her life depends on it!"

I let out an almost inaudible sigh of relief, happy that my mother left out the detail of me nearly *losing* my life by slipping off of a boulder.

Barley then looked back at me, looking genuinely intrigued. "Oh, yeah? Leaping and jumping, huh?" My parents and I then exchanged an intrigued glance as Barley then turned, trotting towards what looked like a very smooth rock made out of wood, but it had sharp corners. At the bottom of it was a large pile of hay. "This is the perfect place to practice! Do you want to try jumping from this crate? The hay below will give you a soft landing."

I let out an excited gasp as I began to knead my paws into the ground. *It's perfect! There's no way that I can get hurt!*

I whipped myself around to face my parents, already prepared for them to retort the idea. "*Please*, can I try it? I promise that I'll be careful and not slip this time!"

Sparrow let out a snort and lowered his head in response. "You slipping was not the problem..."

I began to knead my paws into the ground again as I heard Barley let out a chuckle from behind me. "Oh, come on! This... c-*crate* is smaller than that boulder, and like Barley said, I have a soft landing!" I then trotted up to my parents, looking up at them with wide, pleading pale blue eyes. "*And* you all are here to watch me! *Please?*"

I then looked back at Barley when I heard him let out a sniff. "Uh, oh. I haven't started anything, have I?"

Chrissy let out a purr of amusement, flashing Barley a reassuring look. "Absolutely not, Barley. In fact..." She then trailed off and let out a sigh before nervously glancing back at me. "Have at it, Mist." I then had to hold back my squeals of excitement as she bent down, grabbed me in her jaws, and then gently placed me at the top of the crate. "For goodness sake, be careful, or I'll make you hunt every single mouse in this barn."

I then stared confusedly back at my mother as she stepped away from the crate. "But... I don't even know how to hunt yet!"

Barley then let out a surprised grunt, his eyes gleaming as he gave a flick of his ears. "Oh, really? Maybe that can be tomorrow's lesson!"

"And we will teach you how to hunt so that you can hunt down every mouse in this barn!" Chrissy then went on, causing me to let out a *mrrow* of laughter. She then exchanged a glance with Sparrow. "But if you take your time and are careful with this jump, just maybe we'll teach you without making you hunt down every mouse in this barn..."

I let out a small squeal and a sharp nod. "Deal!" I exclaimed before padding more towards the center of the crate and slowly crouching down. *Take your time and be careful. I can do this.*

I felt all three pairs of eyes on me as I took a deep breath, took a step back, aimed forward with my eyes, and then pushed off of my back legs and off of the crate. *I can do this,* I thought once again, relieved that I'd already passed the step that had once involved slipping off of the edge.

And after what didn't even feel like a moment, I felt my paws meet the soft straw below. But as the adrenaline continued to rush through my blood, I didn't let myself fully land, and actually used that adrenaline and momentum to simply bounce off of the hay – leaping forward once again and landing on a more-flattened pile of hay. *Holy heck, I did it!*

And if that wasn't enough, just hearing the praise of my father echo through the barn made it feel even more amazing. "Way to go, Mist! That was close to perfect." He then quickly lifted up his tail after I gasped, my eyes practically popping out of my head. "But *please* don't take that as 'go jump off of another boulder'."

"I second that," Chrissy purred before running up to me and licking my cheek. "That really was wonderful, Mist. You continue to amaze me. What did you think, Barley?"

I quickly looked back at the tom, actually eager to hear the opinions of the very kind, and seemingly wise new friend that we'd made. "Definitely one of the best jumps I've ever seen – and I know some wild cats that leap from rocks and trees all of the time!"

My eyes grew wider with Barley's words, and I found myself wanting to press him. *More cats that are like us?* "Wild cats? You

know more wild cats? Wild cats like *us* that also wander?"

Barley nodded and gave a shrug. "Almost, but they're a tad bit different – they don't wander. They find a place and make it theirs!" Barley then purred as he met my wide, intrigued eyes. "You've never heard of them? Oh, they're everywhere!"

My curiosity continued to take over, and I excitedly kneaded my paws into the ground as I looked up at Barley. For some reason, hearing about more cats that were *nearby* that also seemed to have such a sense of adventure made me want to know *everything* about them. "*Please* tell me more about them!"

I then simply watched, still antsy as Barley seemed to exchange an amused look with my parents. "Here's a deal – tomorrow, when you learn how to hunt, I'll tell you everything that I know if you catch at least *one* mouse. How does that sound?"

I let out a gasp and then gave the black and white tom an eager nod. "Deal again!" I exclaimed.

"Of course it's a deal!" Sparrow then meowed. "She's going to catch all of the mice in the barn without even trying."

"It's about time we teach you how to hunt, anyway, and a barn full of mice is a wonderful place to start," Chrissy then purred. I then flicked my ears as Chrissy then patted my head with her tail. "But for now, I think it's about time we got some rest. Where should we sleep, Barley?"

Barley padded past all three of us, flicking his tail towards one corner of the barn where piles of hay were scattered everywhere, including some piles that were as large as tree stumps. Above it all was a somewhat large hole in the barn wall where the moonlight was breaking through, giving us the natural light that we were used to. "If I had to pick, I'd say that that corner's a great fit for you three. The hay that they keep over there is pretty soft, and there's plenty of room."

Both of my parents nodded, flashing Barley a grateful look as he then trotted ahead, beginning to leap up a stack of old tree trunks

and piles of hay. "I usually sleep up on the second level, so just give a shout if you need anything, and I'll be right down!"

"Thanks, Barley!" my mother called out to the tom as he disappeared up onto the higher tier of the barn. I then tilted my head to the side as she then flashed me a determined, mischievous look through hazel eyes. "First one over to that corner gets to eat the first mouse tomorrow!"

Beside me, Sparrow let out one of his usual teasing snorts. "Oh, you're on!"

"It's gonna be me!" I squealed, pelting ahead without giving either of my parents a cue. And with that, I pelted to that corner the mostly quickly that I ever could, *even though I really don't care if I get the first mouse, would you believe it!* I thought as I purred and raced beside my parents. *I get to learn how to hunt them tomorrow anyway, and I hopefully will also get to hear about these wild cats that Barley seems to know so much about.*

I then felt my stomach twist with excitement as I let myself skid to a stop as I arrived at the piles of hay. *For some reason, that might be what I'm looking forward to the most...*

Chapter 3

[image]

It was in my sights now.

Just tail-lengths away was I think the plumpest mouse that I had seen in this barn so far. And as far as I knew, it still hadn't noticed me from where I stood just behind a pile of hay, positioned in the new hunting crouch that Barley had shown me just earlier.

And all I could do for the moment was wait for the right time to pounce. "...Now?" I whispered as quietly as I could.

I could hear Barley take a light pawstep behind me, and I then felt his breath on my back as he leaned his head forward. "No... wait just a moment..." He then whispered in reply.

I gave a quick, light nod.

And then I proceeded to wait a moment. "Now?"

I could tell Barley was now trying to suppress a purr of amusement. "Not quite yet, Mist."

I took a slow, deep breath, gave a silent lash of my tail, and then tried to adjust my hunting crouch. My fur then began to tingle with anticipation as I watched the mouse start to sniff at a piece of hay in front of it.

I found myself having to hold back an anxious whimper. "...*Now?*"

"You tell us, Mist," I then heard my mother whisper from my other side. "You know how far forward you'll need to leap to get to it."

I slightly shifted in my place, giving another nervous lash of my tail. *I'm honestly not sure if I* do *know...* "O-okay..." I breathed despite my uncertainty.

I then heard another quiet set of pawsteps, and I let myself feel

slightly comforted as my father's scent flooded through my nostrils. "You can do it, Mist," he meowed simply.

I can do it.

I took one last deep breath and readjusted myself once again, continuing to watch the mouse ahead of me. *It's distracted, and I think that it's just far enough away to where I can land on or next to it...* I tried to convince myself. *I can do it.*

Then, without letting myself think any more about it, I decided to leap forward, my back legs pushing off of the ground and bringing me to be airborne for just a heartbeat before I reached out my front paws in an attempt to swipe at the mouse.

And unfortunately for me, while I'd judged distance fairly well, my claws only brushed the creature's fur, and it quickly began to run away.

I could only stand for a moment, my ears flicking as I watched it flee. *Shoot!*

But I then didn't waste another moment chasing after it, determined not to fail. However, it was well ahead of me, and I had absolutely no way to stop it.

At least, I thought that I didn't.

The mouse was only tail-lengths from escaping through the same entrance my parents and I had used to get into the barn for the first time. But next to that entrance was a stack of hay that was just tall enough for me to quickly climb up to.

So, without even being able to take a moment to hesitate, I leaped onto the hay bale, used my claws as a grip as I climbed up, made it to the top, and then leaped off of the side to intercept the mouse. *Yes!*

And sure enough, I landed right on top of the creature, and was easily able to use my little claws to swipe at its neck. *Take that, you slowpoke!*

I then watched, slightly surprised as it then fell limp. Sorry, though...

That surprise and slight guilt only lasted a heartbeat as it then processed all over again that I had just made my first ever catch.

No way! I thought excitedly as I then looked back happily at the three older cats behind me. "I did it! I caught my first mouse! Wow, I..."

I then trailed off of my own words, quickly noticing that Sparrow wasn't standing with Chrissy or Barley, and instead was off to the side – his back to me, and his head lowered as he shook it slowly. "Um... father?" I purred, my head tilting to the side.

He didn't look at me. "Goodness almighty..." he sighed, his head still shaking.

I then looked to my mother, whose hazel eyes were narrowed but glittering with amusement. "Your father was a bit startled when you jumped onto the hay bale..."

I then had to suppress a *mrrow* of laughter as Sparrow then raised his tail, still not looking at either of us. "I just need a moment," he meowed a bit more sharply.

Chrissy simply stared back at him, her eyes still narrowed as she shook her head. "Hm, there's my strong, brave mate. Anyway..." Her gaze completely changed, her eyes glowing with excitement and happiness as she ran up to meet me. "Mist! I cannot believe you – amazing job!"

She then ran up to the hay bale, giving it a glance and brushing my flank with her tail. "That jump was perfect. Did your landing feel okay?"

I eagerly gave my mother a nod. *It felt so natural – I didn't even have to think about it!* "Oh, yeah!" I then meowed out loud, grabbing my mouse in my jaws and then walking with my mother over to Barley and my father. "Just fine!"

I then proceeded to drop the mouse in front of Barley, who had

simply been watching my victory happily and proudly. "Thank you for the lesson, Barley!" I purred as I looked up at him.

Barley looked down at me with warm, cheerful eyes. "Aw, of course, young one. That was one fast mouse, and you thought on your paws... literally!" he meowed kindly before letting out an amused sniff. "I can't take credit for that jump though!"

I then let out a purr as my mother lifted her chin and gave a lash of her tail. "Oh, I'll take the credit, I suppose!" She then looked over her shoulder, at where my father was still standing with his back to us. "Maybe Sparrow will want to take some once he's calmed down."

I then continued to purr as my mother's eyes actually flashed with concern for just a moment, and she turned to face her mate. "Are you sure you're alright, honey?"

I then began to shake my head slowly, a smirk emerging on my face as I watched Sparrow take a deep breath, and then finally turn around. "Yes, I'm alright," he sighed, before flashing me a genuinely proud expression. "Great job, Mist. I just wish I'd had some time to prepare for that."

Chrissy then let out a snort. "You couldn't when Mist continuously took pauses and kept asking '...Now? ...Now? ...*Now?*'"

I then let out another *mrrow* of laughter as Sparrow interrupted my mother by brushing his fluffy tail all over her face. "*Yes*, thank you for the lesson, Barley," my father meowed in an overly enthusiastic tone. He then flashed my mother a teasing look before going on more calmly, "I think Mist got lessons from the most experienced mouse hunter in existence."

Barley looked down shyly for a moment, giving a shrug. "It really was nothing. Mist is a very quick learner!" he then meowed kindly.

He then shifted his blue gaze over to me, the mischievous gleam in them suddenly causing me to be overwhelmed with curiosity. "The next step is learning how to hunt in the forest, which I think your parents would be much better mentors for than me!"

I flicked my ears and let out a gasp. *Hunting in the forest! I've only ever gotten to watch Sparrow and Chrissy do it!*

I then shifted my gaze to look at my parents, trying with all of my might to try and catch their reaction to Barley's words. Do they think I'm old enough now? "Oh my goodness, mother and father, can you *please* teach me?" I began to beg as I trotted up to the two of them. "It shouldn't take long – I already know the hunter's crouch, how to leap, and I've caught something before!"

As I had predicted they would, my parents exchanged a nervous, contemplative glance between each other before replying to me. "That is true, and those skills are a great foundation to being able to learn to hunt in the forest, however," my father began, his dark gray gaze kind but firm, "Barley is right. It is definitely a whole different realm, and requires a bit more attentiveness and patience. Which..."

Sparrow then flashed my mother a humored glance. "...you clearly need a bit of work on, Mist."

"Which means that I should practice it..." I murmured, tilting my head forward towards my parents and cocking an eyebrow. "Which means that I should learn how to hunt in the forest!"

I then watched, holding back laughter as my father looked back at me, a smirk emerging on his face as his eyes narrowed. He then looked back at my mother. "Hm, she's got your wit, Chrissy."

Beside him, my mother let out a sigh and closed her eyes. "Oh, yes, she does," she breathed. She then opened her eyes, exchanging yet another uncertain glance with my father before looking down at me. "And I suppose that after such a successful first hunting lesson, we shouldn't stop now..."

I let out another gasp, and I suddenly felt as if my eyes were going to fall out of my head from how wide they were. "Really?"

Sparrow then flashed Chrissy yet another look, almost to receive confirmation from her, before giving me a definitive nod. "Really. Let's do it," he meowed, actually seeming to grow excited himself as he then began to pad towards our barn entrance. "We'd better go

right now – the sun is already at its highest! We'll be back soon, Barley!"

I then jumped up in the air, and I could help but let out a squeal as I then burst forward, running ahead of the both of my parents and then making out onto the grass outside. I couldn't help but then simply jump around in it for a moment and feel its softness under my paws. *As neat as the barn has been, I definitely prefer this soft ground as opposed to... what was it that Barley called it? Wood? Wood isn't nearly as comfy!*

And after a few moments of simply frolicking, enjoying the sun, and waiting for my parents to join me, I abruptly froze and let out yet another gasp as something crossed my mind. *Wait a moment, I just remembered that Barley had promised to tell me all about the wild cats if I caught a mouse, and I actually did!* I thought, my mouth dropping open as annoyance at myself for forgetting sunk in. *I totally meant to ask him about it immediately after! Should I go back in and remind him? I have to know what he was going to tell me about them! It must be important since he made the promise in the first place!*

But just as I was about to take my first pawstep back towards the barn, my parents emerged one after the other through the barn entrance – both of them now looking more than ready to teach me. *Ah... well...*

I then looked up to the sky, and as my father had said, the sun was right smack in the middle of it, and it would begin to set before I knew it. *If I want to learn how to hunt out here, I can't delay any time...*

I then took a deep breath, the excitement at continuing my hunting lesson beginning to sink in as I kneaded my paws into the ground. *Later.*

I then tried to completely shake it off for now as my parents then began to lead me deeper into the forest. This was going to be my *real* test of patience. *I'll get to hear all about it later.*

~>~>~>~>~>~

Sparrow had sure been right – hunting out in the forest was an entirely different realm, and my patience had been tested like it never had before.

My parents had spent the entire afternoon teaching me the basic techniques of hunting in the forest – among trees, bushes, the grass, with rocks and sticks scattered all over the ground. *Which all make things so, so much harder!*

There was plenty of prey scattering around in the forest, however, having to not only focus on the prey itself, but literally every single step that I took and every movement that I made was so incredibly difficult. *So* difficult that I hadn't even managed to catch anything, to my disappointment.

I had been close so many times, but I either leapt too early, waited too long, or stepped on or brushed something as I moved. *There are so, so many things to think about!* I thought frustratedly as I followed Sparrow and Chrissy through the forest. *Gee, I wonder if I'll ever manage it...*

I then glanced first at my mother, and then my father as they each walked with one of their own catches in their mouths. Despite my mistakes, they had been nothing but encouraging, as always, and made sure that I knew that it just all took practice. *It was just the first day of me learning,* I tried to tell myself as I took a deep breath. *This is yet another way that I'll have to learn to be patient...*

I then couldn't help but then lick my lips as I looked more closely at the shrew and thrush that were in my parents' jaws. *And you know what? Even though mother and father were the only ones to catch something, I think that I'm actually fine with that!*

I excitedly quickened my pace, trying to ignore the rumbling of my stomach as the barn ahead slowly came into sight. But only moments after that, Chrissy came to an abrupt pause.

"Hm, I just realized that it's not even really necessary that we bring this prey to Barley's farm," my mother meowed through her full mouth. "He has all of the mice in the world in there!"

I then looked to my father as he let out an amused sniff. "True, however, maybe he should experience something other than all of the mice in the world..." he then replied. I then was surprised to see his dark gray eyes narrow as his gaze fell on Chrissy's catch. "This shrew is going to change his life! Unlike that thrush you're holding..."

I then let out a purr of amusement as my mother rolled her eyes. "Oh, please!" She then sharply shifted her gaze towards me, her hazel eyes narrowed. "Mist, which do you like better?"

I actually found myself taking a step back. "Um... I feel like it might be dangerous if I comment."

I then slowly raised my eyebrows as Chrissy didn't respond immediately, and simply looked deep in thought. "Fair enough," she eventually muttered after a few heartbeats. She then began walking once again. "I suppose we'll have Barley settle the debate."

"Speaking of Barley," my father then began, following after my mother, "are we staying in the barn with him again tonight?"

He then nodded up to the sky, where the sun was already fairly low in the sky, and beginning to hide behind the trees. "It's already getting pretty late, and we still have yet to eat our dinner..."

I let out a gasp, practically running up to get in between my parents and not even letting my mother ponder the question. "Which is exactly why we should stay another night!" I meowed confidently up to my father before then turning to look at Chrissy. "Please? The barn is so much fun!" *And I'm also on a mission!* I thought to myself, still having yet to hear Barley's answers to my big questions. *But along with that, I have to admit, it's actually kind of nice knowing where exactly the place is that I'll be sleeping tonight...*

I then let out a purr as Chrissy let out a sniff and ruffled my head with her tail. "Really? I wasn't getting that impression from you at all," she teased before giving a nod to Sparrow. "I'm fine with it as long as you are."

I then eagerly looked at Sparrow as he stopped just by our entrance

to the barn. "Well, sure I am!" he meowed almost instantly, causing me to squeal and jump in the air in excitement. He then gave a lash of his tail, gesturing for me and my mother to go inside. "We have to settle the thrush and shrew debate, don't we?"

Yes!

I then practically ran inside the barn in excitement, so thrilled that things were going just a bit more in my favor after the failed forest-hunting attempt. "Hi, Barley!" I exclaimed to the black and white tom as my gaze fell on him. "We're back!"

Barley let out a purr of amusement, padding over to join us from where he'd settled in a nest of hay. "I can see that! Welcome back," he meowed kindly before flashing me an eager glance. "How did hunting in the forest go for you?"

At that question, I looked down shyly and immediately began to shift my paws back and forth. "Um... it was a little hard..." I murmured honestly. "I definitely need to practice some more."

I then looked up to see that Barley didn't even look the smallest bit disappointed, which honestly felt more uplifting than I ever could have thought. "Ah, that's alright! It was your first time. You're right – you just need a little practice," he meowed warmly. I then was surprised to see him give me a quick wink. "And hey, you still caught that mouse in here earlier, which means that I'll owe you a story later."

I felt my eyes immediately widen as I let out a quiet gasp. *He remembers! Thank goodness,* I thought excitedly.

I was almost tempted to press the older tom with questions about the wild cats right then and there, but I unfortunately couldn't let out another word as my parents approached from behind me, each dropping their catches in front of Barley. "Barley, we have a question for you," my father began, and I had to force myself from bursting out in laughter. "You're surely tried prey aside from mice, right?"

Barley flashed both Chrissy and Sparrow a humored look before

answering. "Of course I have! Though it's been a while..." I then watched as he slowly lowered his gaze to look down at the two catches. "And I'm certainly not opposed to it..."

"Wonderful!" my mother then purred as she settled down onto the barn floor. "Then while we enjoy this prey, why don't you settle a debate for us?" She then slowly pushed her thrush towards the loner. "Though it's really not a debate, if you ask me..."

I then watched as Barley let out a chuckle and cocked a single eyebrow. "Hm, interesting. I'm up for it!" he purred, bringing me to let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "But I don't want to take over your catches before you all have even taken a bite. Aren't you hungry?"

Chrissy then narrowed her eyes, pushing her thrush even closer to Barley. "I'm hungry for victory," she nearly whispered.

"Good gosh," my father then sighed, giving a roll of his eyes. "They're also gifts of gratitude to you, Barley. Thank you so much for letting us stay here, really."

Barley then gave my father, who had let his tail settle on the tom's shoulder, a warm nod. "It really is no problem at all. I love to welcome any visitors, and you all have been wonderful to have here," he purred before looking back down at the two pieces of prey in front of him. "Something else I love to do is settle a debate between two clearly very passionate cats, so..."

I then watched, my eyes wide with anticipation as Barley then bent down to take a bite of the thrush. And then, surely on purpose, his gaze was unreadable as he then took a bite and began to chew on the catch. "Okay..." he then meowed through a full mouth. Then, once he had swallowed, he gave a sharp nod to my father. "Now give me the shrew."

Sparrow instantly complied, practically sliding his catch towards the barn cat. *Moment of truth...*

Barley then stopped the sliding creature with his paw, proceeding to bend down and then take a bite out of it. He took a longer time to eat this one, and I honestly wasn't sure what that meant.

"Interesting..." he then muttered after a few heartbeats.

And by the time he actually swallowed it, I could practically sense the tension and anticipation that was spiraling between me and my parents as we watched him ponder. I couldn't help but prick my ears in excitement as the tom eventually gave another sharp nod. "Alright, I've figured it out!"

Chrissy let out a gasp, scooting a mouse-length closer to Barley, her eyes narrowed. "...And?"

I then had to suppress laughter once again as Barley flashed my mother a sympathetic look, resting the tip of his tail on her shoulder as he then spoke again. "I'm sorry, Chrissy..." he meowed regretfully. "I'm just not a fan of the feathers."

He then looked over to my father, his blue gaze now glowing with pride. "It's the shrew for me!"

"Ha!" my father exclaimed, looking victorious as he stood up and then looked sharply back at my mother. "Debate settled!"

Chrissy simply let out a contemptuous grunt, pulling the thrush away from Barley and towards her chest. "Hm, that's fine! More thrush for me and Mist then!" She then looked back at me, her hazel eyes briefly flashing with nerves. "That is, if she's willing to share it with me?"

I let out another purr as I ran up to my mother without hesitation, sympathetically pressing my flank against her shoulder – feeling slightly badly that she'd lost the shrew-thrush war. "Of course I will!"

Chrissy also let out a purr, giving me a gentle lick on the head. "Good," she meowed softly before looking back at Barley and Sparrow, who were already beginning to dig into the shrew. "I'm not even that offended – wren birds are actually my favorite. I actually like them so much that I'm not sure that I would eat one..."

Sparrow let put a snort after he'd swallowed a bite of shrew. "Oh, of course you say that *now*."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter at my father's comment, then I eagerly ran up to my mother's thrush and took the biggest bite out of it that I could. And, of course, it was absolutely delicious, but at the same time...

I think I liked shrew just a *little* better.

But I was still perfectly satisfied being full of thrush when the moon finally rose, and it was time to go to sleep for the night.

But was I going to sleep any time soon? Absolutely not!

Unfortunately, during our meal and beyond, I'd never gotten a chance to ask Barley about the wild cats, and assuming that me and my parents were officially leaving the barn tomorrow, *I can't waste another moment!*

I tried my hardest to wait until my parents were fast asleep before I made any sort of attempt. *And luckily, I think I tired them out with the hunting lessons today, thank goodness!*

When I finally thought that the time was right, I slowly but surely tried to wriggle myself away from the nest that Chrissy, Sparrow, and I had settled in. Chrissy had had her tail wrapped around my little flank, but luckily the grip hadn't been strong at all, and I escaped without any issue at all. I then very quietly padded across the farm, the light from the moon leaking in from outside actually giving me a clear path to travel through.

And I already felt my fur beginning to tingle with anticipation and excitement as I then arrived at the... *ladder* that I had watched Barley climb up earlier to get to his usual sleeping place.

But I was nowhere near big enough or *ready* to make that climb, and instead climbed a stack of hay bales that luckily led all the way up to the second level of the barn. And I proved earlier today that I can easily climb these!

And once again, without a problem, I made it to my destination. *Weird...* I thought, giving my fur a shake in order to get rid of any hay sticking to it. *I'm so focused on hearing what Barley has to say that*

I wasn't even thinking about how difficult that climb would usually be. Maybe not thinking too much is the key to doing things that scare me!

"Mist?"

I then nearly flinched as I heard Barley's hushed voice from the other side of the barn, and I followed his meow to see him beginning to sit up in his nest. "That's either you, or a very large mouse," he then purred, also giving a shake of his own fur.

I let out a quiet purr of amusement as I then ran up to meet him. "Not a very large mouse, it's Mist!" I whispered again. "I'm sorry, did I wake you?"

Barley shook his head quickly, his eyes flashing with reassurance as he gave a dismissive lash of his tail. "Not at all. I was awake anyhow, and it's a good thing too," he meowed, lightly nudging my shoulder with his tail. "I had a hunch that you might try to catch me up here."

I raised my eyebrows and widened my eyes. "Really? You did?"

Barley then let out another purr. "With how eager you are to hear about these wild cats that I know? Of course!" I then began to knead my paws in excitement as he brushed past me, walking across the barn and pausing just under a fairly big hole in the barn's top. "Come on – I know the perfect place that we can settle."

Without any hesitation, I began to follow Barley to that very spot. But only after a moment, I stopped abruptly in surprise as the tom made a swift leap up and out of the hole. I then let out a purr of amusement as he then poked his head out from the top. "Don't worry, I won't make you jump like that – just stand below me, and I'll hoist you up!"

I eagerly gave the barn cat a nod before complying. "Cool!" I squealed quietly as I then felt Barley's jaws grab my flank and gently bring me up through the barn roof.

And immediately once the top of the barn came into view and Barley set me down, my mouth dropped as I began to process

everything around me, which was... *everything*. "Wow..." I breathed as I became overwhelmed with how much I could see.

Just in front of me, beyond the plains and a river that stood on the other side of the barn, the forest that I was familiar with stretched farther than I ever imagined that it could, and just barely out of my sight, I could see a Twolegplace far off into the distance. To my left was a very ominous-looking area full of tall stones, which eventually turned into marshy plains. To my right, beyond more plains and forest, I could see what looked to be an even larger Twolegplace, with buildings taller than any tree I'd ever seen. *Wow... just wow.*

As I stood there in awe, I barely noticed when Barley walked up to stand beside me. "Amazing, isn't it? I figured that this view would serve as a guide for what I'm going to share with you about these wild cats."

I then felt my eyes widen with amazement even more as I looked up at the older tom. "Really?" I breathed, my fur not only tingling with excitement anymore, but the light breeze that blew it. "How so?"

Before answering, Barley let out a stretch and then settled down on the barn roof. "Well, let me tell you," he meowed as he then gestured for me to also make my spot. "Believe it or not, these wild cats are spread out throughout almost *all* of this."

My eyes widened even more at that statement. "No way..."

Barley briefly looked back at me from where he'd also been enjoying the view. "Way, way!" he purred. "Unlike you and your parents, these wild cats come together in large groups, and these groups each choose a place that they want to live and adjust to that way of living. They choose a leader to guide their group. They also hunt their own food, but they defend the place that they live in whatever way that they can, and they don't let any other group get in their territory!"

He then gestured with his tail for me to look towards the marshy area to my left. "While no groups of cats live around those stones over there, over by those marshes are where one group of cats

settles. I don't know too much about them, but their paws are accustomed to walking on muddy ground, and they love to eat frogs and reptiles."

I couldn't help but wrinkle my nose at that. "They eat them... willingly?"

Barley sniffed and shrugged beside me. "I'm stumped on that one too," he muttered before then gesturing to the plains just in front of the barn. "There in those fields and hills are where the very long-limbed, fast-running cats settle," Barley went on. "They don't need any shade or cover to settle; they sleep out in the open, no problem. You and your parents have done that before, haven't you?"

I nodded eagerly back at Barley. "Yes, we have! It feels so strange though..." I then murmured. "I almost feel like I'm being watched constantly!"

Barley let out a small chuckle. "I can understand that!" he meowed, then nodding over to the river that stretched in between the plains and the forest. "Over there is where I've been told that 'water-cats' live. They actually swim in that river all of the time, hunt fish for their food, and decorate their dens with seashells." I then felt a shiver run down my spine as Barley then gestured with his tail towards the forest beyond that. "And just next to that river, as you can probably tell, is where the forest cats live. They live among the trees, and hunt things like birds or squirrels for their food."

"Oh, yeah?" I murmured as I struggled to take my eyes off of the forest. "That's so neat..." *That's definitely the kind of place that I've liked the most out of all the places me and my parents have been...*

Barley slowly nodded at me, his eyes narrowed but full of amusement as he quickly realized that these forest cats had piqued my interest the most. "It most certainly is," he purred, giving me another light nudge. "They surely also climb those countless amount of trees that they have as well!"

I couldn't help but gasp again. *Climbing... and trees!*

He then looked back at the forest, his gaze actually filling up with

gratitude. "I actually am somewhat acquainted with the forest cats, and have gotten to know their leader," he then revealed, causing my mouth to drop all over again. "They definitely seem to be the more kind and welcoming group of forest cats, I have to admit."

"No way..." I breathed all over again, finally trying to process everything that Barley had shared with me – which was all more than I ever could have hoped for him to share with me. *They seem so different, and yet so much alike to how my family and I live our lives. I wonder if we'll ever cross paths with them in our travels?*

I then took a deep breath, taking one last look at everything before nodding up at Barley. *Either way, I'm so amazed at all of this... these wild cats sound like something else, and I can't believe that Barley* knows *them!* "Thank you so, so much for sharing all of this with me, Barley!" I meowed enthusiastically to the farm cat. "I seriously so enjoyed all of that!"

I then flicked my ears, peering past the tom as I realized that he had actually missed apart of this huge view of ours. Before he could even answer to my thanks, I lashed my tail in the direction of the large, looming buildings that stood far over to our right. "Oh, what about that Twolegplace over there? Do cats live there?"

To my surprise, Barley's blue eyes briefly seemed to flash with alarm at my question, and his black and white fur raised just a little. "O-over there? Where all of the big buildings are?"

I simply gave Barley slow nod, my curiosity now peaking like it never had before.

But Barley continued to shock me by screwing his eyes shut, as if he were uncomfortable. "Yes, yes, cats do live over there, but..." he began, seemingly to try and select his words carefully. "But believe me, they... they're quite different from the wild cats that live out in the plains and the forest. They can be ruthless, and dangerous... so, definitely tell your parents to steer clear." He then seemed to shift uncomfortably once again. "At least, that's what I've heard, I mean. Trust me – stay away from them, Mist."

I then simply gave him another nod, watching as he then stood up

and shook out his fur once again. "But anyway," he then went on, his voice now back to his typically, warm, kind tone, "I'm sure that after all of this information, it's tired you all out, huh?"

Although I didn't want to admit it, I found my jaws opening up into a huge yawn almost on cue. "Honestly... yeah!" I meowed through my yawn. "I am a little tired!"

Barley let out another chuckle, nodding before leading me back to the hole that we had come out of. "I thought so – you'd better go and get some sleep then. You need to make sure that you're well-rested just in case you get another hunting lesson tomorrow."

I gave Barley yet another nod. "Of course!" I tried to meow more enthusiastically despite my concern at Barley's quick change of subject. And as I followed him towards our entrance, everything that he had shared with me continued to swirl around in my head. *And this while likely still keep me from sleeping even if I'm in my nest!*

After taking one last glance at the plains, marshes, and the river, I let my gaze rest on the forest for a moment. *Hm, curiosier...*

I then briefly shifted my gaze over to the large, looming Twolegplace. *And curioser...* I thought just before Barley grabbed me in his jaws once again, gently beginning to lower me down into the hole.

Chapter 4

[image]

The sun was bright, its rays gleaming from where it stood in the middle of the sky as Chrissy and Sparrow led me through the forest of pine trees.

Where were we going? I had absolutely no idea, but apparently it was a surprise!

It had now been a few days since we had left Barley and his farm, to my complete disappointment. I had told my parents about my reluctance to leave, and *luckily* they had promised that we would stop by to visit again soon the next time we passed the area.

But since then, we had been traveling intentionally yet aimlessly as usual. However, this morning, we had been traveling since the sun had just barely risen, and both of my parents had seemed very excited to take me to some particular place that would "take almost an entire day's travel".

I had to admit, I had been a bit mopey since leaving Barley's barn – I had loved the change in atmosphere and the older tom's kindness and warm presence. *Our next visit already can't get here fast enough!* But I also had to admit – my sadness was already quickly going away with the day full of adventure I was already having.

For the first time in my entire life, I had actually been able to cross a *thunderpath* for the first time. Up until this point, my parents had been too nervous to even cross while *carrying* me, but according to them – we had no choice but to take this path in order to make it to our destination.

And thank goodness our attempt to cross had been successful, considering how busy the thunderpath had been – monsters pelting from both sides, but luckily not seeming to notice us at all. Once there had been a free moment, Chrissy, Sparrow and I had run like we were being chased by hungry foxes. And despite Sparrow

initially telling me that he would let me cross by myself, I still felt his jaws grip my flank and carry me the rest of the way.

And he had gently placed me back onto the grass, a monster actually passing by, its wind brushing our fur, just a few moments later. *Hm, next time for sure, then,* I thought jokingly as I stood up and gave a shake of my fur. I suppose I got a bit of a thrill for the first half!

I then forced myself to push away my disappointment, but also humored thoughts as I then excitedly turned to look at my parents, who were already padding ahead through some trees. "Alright, what now? Are we close at all?"

Chrissy briefly slowed down her pace and looked over her shoulder back at me, waiting for me to catch up and stand in between her and Sparrow. "Well, funny that you ask that now," she purred, flicking her tail forward where the trees were already beginning to disappear to reveal the territory ahead. "That thunderpath actually was our landmark to let us know that we're nearly there!"

I let out a gasp of surprise and excitement at those words, and before I could even give a reply, I fell speechless and I felt my mouth drop open as I processed what was in front of me – stone for what looked like infinity, which surprisingly looked like the neatest thing ever.

Not only was the ground itself stone, but there were several tall, miniature looking pointy mountains and cliffs spread everywhere. There were also a couple of tunnels that led who-knows-where. I had truly never seen a place that embodied *fun* or *cool* so perfectly for me.

And if all of that wasn't exciting enough, I quickly realized that I recognized this place – I had easily been able to spot it from the view at the top of Barley's barn. "No way!" I finally breathed after a few heartbeats of simply taking it all in. "I've seen this place before!"

I then let out a purr of amusement, fully having anticipated the confused look on my mother's face when she looked back at me.

"*You've* been here, and we haven't?" she muttered, a single eyebrow raising on her face.

I then let out a full *mrrow* of laughter as both of my parents exchanged a glance. "No, of course not!" I reassured them. "I saw it from far away once – Barley took me onto the roof of the barn the last night that we spent there."

To my surprise, my mother simply nodded quickly before exchanging another amused glance with Sparrow. "Oh, we know about that."

I flicked my ears, my mouth dropping once again in shock. "What? How did you all find out?"

Sparrow shrugged, and then brushed his fluffy tail along his mate's shoulder. "Well, for one, Chrissy woke up and seemed to immediately notice that you weren't next to her anymore..."

"Motherly instincts can't go wrong!" Chrissy purred, flashing an affectionate look back at my father.

"And secondly," he then continued as he gave me a wink, "there's really no way that you can climb up stacks of hay silently."

"And thirdly..." Chrissy went on as I let out an annoyed sigh and closed my eyes. "We heard you two talking, I suppose."

I then let out a huff, lowering my head in embarrassment, but also simultaneously trying to hide my rising laughter. "Whoops..." I murmured shyly before slowly lifting my gaze to look at my parents. "Hopefully you don't think of me too badly. Being *that* sneaky isn't something I'll do..."

I then shuffled my paws back and forth, tilting my head as both of my parents flashed me a skeptical look. "...often?"

Sparrow let out a chuckle and gave a slow shake of his head. "Hm, alright," he meowed warmly before then turning to face the mounds of stones ahead of us. "So, then you've gotten to see a bird's eye view of these stones already, huh? I suppose that takes away from the surprise a little bit, however..."

He then shyly looked back at me over his shoulder. "I hope that you're still excited?"

I immediately gave my father an eager nod, my heart practically soaring as I continued to look around at my incredible surroundings. "Of course I am!" I assured him. "Seeing it from a distance is nothing like being there!"

"Well, we're glad," Chrissy then purred as she gave me a lick on the head. "We figured that you might like to practice your jumping and climbing on something that wasn't practically a pebble... and it's also just a pretty neat place to explore. What do you think?"

"Oh, it's absolutely incredible!" I quickly replied. I then tilted my head as I looked to both of my parents. "How did you two find out about this place?"

"Just about in the same way you did, actually!" Sparrow answered, taking his own wide glance around the area before padding up to flank Chrissy. "Mist, do you remember that night that we spent next to that tall cliff? You were just barely a moon old, so you probably don't, but your mother and I saw it from that view and committed to bringing you here someday."

I let out a purr as I shook I head. "You're right, I definitely don't remember! But either way," I then took a moment to press my head affectionally against both of my parents. "Thank you for doing it!"

I then continued to purr as my mother pulled me closer to her with her tail, giving me another lick on the head. "Thank you for actually showing enthusiasm so that this plan didn't have a very anticlimactic result!" Then, after the three of us shared a laugh, she then gently pushed me forward with her tail. "Well, go on and have fun! We're right here watching you!"

Well, as my mother had commanded me to, I went on and had *fun!*

This large cluster of stones, to me, was a kit's dream play-place, and I definitely treated it as such. I definitely was climbing up and down rocks for at least half of the time – all of the different kinds of stones giving me so many different ways to practice.

I also tried something a bit new, under my parents' supervision, of course, and began to make attempts at making small leaps from one rock to another as well as jumping off of a taller rock onto a shorter rock. Both Sparrow and Chrissy watched me the entire time, as they had promised – giving me tips, demonstrating things for me if I was unsure, and freaking out every once in a while if I tried something a little more risky...

For the second half, *I* actually watched my parents make their own use out of the tall stones, and I watched in complete awe as I watched them climb and then leap of off the tallest stones, and then race around the entire stone area – leaping over and under stones and climbing up and down the, in what felt like half of a heartbeat.

Sparrow came out on top this time. I was sure he was going to be subtly gloating for the next few days...

Then, as the sky was beginning to turn yellow and orange, and the stone area almost brightened as it reflected against the lowering sun, Chrissy, Sparrow and me played a game of tag – my personal favorite to play with them.

I could never tell if my parents intentionally slowed down in order for me to catch them more easily, but either way, I didn't care – my heart was light with happiness, and I was having the most fun that I thought that I would ever have.

Eventually, after what only felt like a few heartbeats of playing, Sparrow tagged me by tapping his tail on my flank. After letting out a sigh and rolling my eyes, I pelted forward to go after my mother, who was anxiously waiting with bright hazel eyes just a few tail-lengths away. No tag-backs!

I was then taken aback when my mother practically flew to her right, running away from the flat area we had been running in the entire game.

Instead, she began running up a large hill made of stone – so tall that I couldn't even see anything on the other side of it. "Hey, Mist! Up here!" she called down as she continued to run. "Bet you can't climb it!"

Just a moment after I began to veer in that direction, she actually paused briefly, looking back at me with her eyes wide. "But if you *can* climb it, which I have the *slightest* suspicion that you can, please do it carefully."

"Please, for goodness sake," Sparrow then whispered to me as he also began to run up and join my mother.

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter before beginning to follow my father and mother up the taller rock, a bit confused, but incredibly excited about the challenge that my mother was giving me.

To my own surprise, I actually made it up the little hill no problem. I guess my practice recently is already beginning to pay off.

Once I made it to the top, more than prepared to tag my mother, I actually paused almost immediately, my mouth dropping yet again as I saw what was in front of me.

It was no Barley's-barn-roof view by a long shot, as we weren't as high up, but I was still absolutely blown away by everything that I saw, and I almost immediately forgot about tag altogether.

Territory that I had never, ever seen before stretched beyond where we were standing. Just in front of us, the river that I had seen from a different point flowed just along a small thunderpath, and beyond that were more fields and plains with animals that looked like little specks scattered around. Beyond that, was another large Twolegplace, with a large stretch of mountains behind it that I could imagine that cats would enter into without ever coming out.

And bringing it all together was the absolutely beautiful sunset, its rays breaking through the clouds and casting over all of it. *Wow...*

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Chrissy whispered, quickly noticing my amazed expression. "I figured that this would be a great spot to watch the sunset!"

"It's definitely not ugly," Sparrow then meowed, his dark gray eyes full of affection as he wrapped his tail around my mother's shoulders. "Good work, I guess."

"Oh, come on," Chrissy then purred, rolling her eyes as if she were annoyed. But I then couldn't help but laugh when my mother nevertheless nuzzled her head into my father's neck fur.

Without hesitation, I ran up to join my parents' embrace, a purr rumbling in my throat as I squeezed myself in between their flanks, leaning my head on my father's front leg and wrapping my tail around my mother's.

I then simply stared at the view ahead, the purr in my throat continuing to rise and feeling as if my heart was rising in the sky to replace the setting sun.

I really hoped that I expressed it enough, but I honestly could not have been more thankful for my parents, who took me on so many adventures and did so many things just to make me happy. They put me first in absolutely any situation needed, and they seemed to receive joy just by seeing me feel joy.

They have gone out of their way countless times to teach me and show me new things. If it wasn't clear already, me doing new things clearly scared them a bit, but they still never stopped me from learning or achieving, and no matter how much doubt I ever showed in myself, they showed very genuine, very convincing confidence that I would be able to do whatever I wanted to someday, even after they were gone and couldn't be there for me anymore.

I then flicked my ears as this thought crossed my mind. *When they are gone, and can't be there for me anymore...*

It was the most horrible thought that I could ever conjure up, so much so that I could never think about it fully without wanting to curl up into the grass and wail. *The most horrible thing about it is the fact that that will happen, for sure, no matter how much I don't want it to...* I thought, my heart suddenly feeling as heavy as the rock we were standing on. *One day, I will be on my own, and Sparrow and Chrissy won't be with me anymore.*

Barely even realizing that I had done it, I found that I pressed myself harder against my father, screwing my eyes shut and then

tightening my tail's grip around my mother.

Chrissy seemed to immediately notice that I had done this, looking down at me with concern in her hazel eyes. "You alright, honey?" she meowed softly, stroking my head with her tail.

And with that, I found myself spilling everything – I mean, these were thoughts that crossed my mind countless times, but I never thought about them too much, as I didn't want them to ruin the current moment, *but still...* I thought to myself. *And... I suppose saying them out loud makes them feel more like a reality...* "I..." I hesitantly began, my head low to the ground. "I just... I get really scared and sad sometimes..."

"Scared and sad?" my father then meowed as he touched his nose to my cheek. "I'm sorry. What are you scared and sad about?"

I found myself shutting my eyes for a moment as I shook my head slowly. "About... growing up, being on my own, and... not being with you two anymore. I just..." I then found myself having to hold back a whimper. "The fact that things can't be like tonight... forever. It's impossible. And the fact that it's going to happen no matter what..." I then screwed my eyes shut even tighter. It's absolutely horrible...

I then forced myself to open my eyes, and then look at my mother and then my father. "I love you both so, so much... how am I supposed to handle... not always being beside you? I *can't* handle it!" I then nearly whimpered. "As amazing as nights like this are, they also remind me that it all won't last forever, and one day, nights like this won't exist..."

The entire time I had been speaking, Chrissy had been lightly stroking my flank with her tail, her gaze full of love and sympathy. "Oh, honey..." she sighed. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I could just barely see her lean her head towards Sparrow. "There's an eloquently-spoken daughter for you!"

I was almost certain that I wasn't mean to hear her whisper, however, it actually cheered me up a little.

After Sparrow then let out the quietest chuckle, Chrissy pulled away and licked my head once again. "First off, let me say that these feelings of yours are completely normal and okay, as scary as they are," she began softly. "I am so, so sorry that they have you feeling so scared and sad. Trust me, your father and I have thoughts like that too."

I then heard her let out a sigh. "And as much as I hate to admit it, and as much as I hate telling you, you're right – there will come a time when you will be on your own, and your father and I won't be able to be with you anymore. But you know what?"

I simply looked up at my mother, my curiosity rising.

Chrissy continued, flicking my ear with her tail. "That's not *now*. But even then, Mist, it may not feel like it, but you *will* be ready when that happens."

"That's right!" my father them chimed in, his dark gaze actually warm as he looked down at me. "I mean, your mother and I can see it already, but with how strong, brave, and adventurous you are, you are going to excel on your own, go on so many adventures, and experience so much. Of course, there's always grief, but then you get to make life your own!"

He then gave Chrissy a light nudge and a look full of love. "You may even find your own friends, family... and take them on all kinds of adventures and experiences," he purred. I was then surprised to hear him let out a snort. "When it comes to finding the tom that you might create that family *with*... well, I certainly hope that I'm there for that..."

I couldn't help but let out a small purr at that comment.

"Sure, your parents come to be a very important part of your life that... well, you could say *guide* you through the first half of your life, you're going to meet so many cats that you come to care about just as much that carry you through the second half," Sparrow then went on. "It's exactly what anyone, your mother and I included, have experienced."

Chrissy then nodded, giving a small purr as she licked her mate's cheek. "Exactly," she then meowed. "While we both still had our parents when we first met, we only had each other once they passed on, but at the same time, we... *had* each other." She then gave a quick shake of her head. "Not that that necessarily means that you need to find a mate to cling onto, but like your father said, you will have other cats in your life that you've met that will give you love and support."

She then gave a small sniff of amusement. "I mean, look! You're barely passed three moons of age and you've met Barley, who you really don't want to seem to stay away from!" After I let out a shy laugh, she then gently stroked my ear with her tail. "But anyway, your father and I also have met friends on our journeys, and then, we felt more than blessed when we had you, and were able to love you and take you on more adventures than we've ever experienced!"

"And... we're glad to hear that we've given you a life full of excitement and adventure that you don't want to lose," Sparrow then continued, and I felt my heart sink all over again when I noticed that his voice was just a bit hoarse. I then looked up to him to see his warm, yet solemn expression. "And both of us really hope that you want to continue to pursue it once we're gone – we are certain that you'll achieve amazing things, Mist."

Chrissy immediately noticed my father's change in demeanor, flashing him a look full of love before touching her muzzle to his. "Dido to that," she nearly whispered. She then looked back down at me, her hazel eyes still overwhelmed with love. "But even then, Mist, we'll *always* be here, I guarantee you that. In whatever way that we can be, because we both love you very, very much."

For a moment, all I could do was stare back into my mother's eyes, so overwhelmed with emotion that I couldn't speak.

As scary as it all still was to think about and hear, my parents' words had put me at ease, as they always did. "Thank you," I finally forced out, pressing more tightly against both Chrissy and Sparrow. "I love you two, too."

Then, after a few moments, I then felt my father brush his tail

against my shoulder. "Hey, Mist," he then murmured softly. "There's something I forgot to tell you in all of that. Do you know what it would have been?"

I sighed and rolled my eyes, but also purred as I immediately knew what my father meant. And again, as it always did, the tactic that my father always reminded me of put me at ease. "I *can* handle it," I whispered, almost just to myself. *I can handle it.*

Chapter 5

[image]

I honestly felt that I was at my peak, a light breeze blowing my long fur and my paws brushing through the grass as I made my way out of the forest, the sun high in the sky, and two large pieces of prey dead in my jaws that I had caught *myself*.

Gripping them both tightly, I reluctantly then left the trees behind me and proceeded forward, heading towards the gorge where me, Sparrow, and Chrissy were currently settled for the morning.

My parents quickly came into sight, the both of them sunning near the edge of the cliff and looking as if they could just stay there for days, not having a care in the world. *It's a very nice day, and the view from this gorge is absolutely beautiful,* I thought as my parents began to stir with my arrival. *And their day is about to get even better!*

I then held back a purr as I set the thrush and the shrew I had caught right at their paws. "Lunch has arrived!" I exclaimed. "I got a thrush *and* a shrew to avoid any conflict. Enjoy!"

Chrissy immediately rolled her eyes as she turned over to lay on her belly rather than her side. "Oh, please!" she sighed as she gave her mate a light nudge with her tail. "After all of this time I'd like to think that your father and I can learn to agree to disagree."

I then watched, still amused as my mother then exchanged a half-humored, half-skeptical look Sparrow before bending down to take a bite of her thrush. "Even though he's wrong."

As I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter, Sparrow gave Chrissy an affectionate look through narrowed eyes. "Why do I feel like this debate is never going to come to a close?"

I shrugged as I then settled down in front of my parents. "Hm, I suppose it depends on how other cats in the family fare."

Sparrow then let out an amused snort as he looked to Chrissy, and then to me. "Well, the pickings are slim, Mist," he meowed with laughter in his voice. "So, I feel like I have to ask your opinion!"

I broke my gaze from my father's abruptly, looking over my shoulder at the view of the waterfall and stream below. "I still decline to speak on the matter," I muttered quickly. *Thank goodness I'm not hungry right now.*

I then looked back at my mother to see her nodding slowly at me, her hazel eyes narrowed. "I respect your choice to play it safe, Mist, I'll admit that," she meowed before bending her head down to take another bite. "Either way, thank you for the prey! Where did you go to hunt?"

I looked over my shoulder once more and gave a flick of my tail, my stomach filling up with butterflies as I almost relived the experience of getting to hunt near the forest on my *own*. "Just below the gorge around the edges of the forest. Honestly, not *too* far from Barley's barn..."

I then let out a long, dramatic sigh as I then looked off in the direction I suspected Barley's barn to be, hoping my parents would catch on to what I was doing... and then comply. "Goodness, I'm sure that barn cat gets lonely sometimes... It's definitely been a little while since we've stopped by!"

I then looked back at my parents, meeting their gazes with wide eyes. "At *least* half a moon!" I then gasped, letting my head fall down to my chest. "Tragic..."

Sparrow simply stared back at me, giving a single nod. "Smooth."

"Thank you!" I then meowed, perking my head back up.

I then watched as my father also looked off to the side. "Well, I suppose you're right... I do miss the taste of endless amounts of mice..." he muttered before then looking over at his mate. "Chrissy?"

My ears flicked with excitement as my mother immediately gave an eager nod. "Sounds good to me!" she meowed as she then looked up

to the sky. "If we leave after this meal, we surely should be able to be there by mid-tomorrow!"

I nearly let out a squeal with those words, but thought better of it almost simultaneously. But goodness, was I so excited to stop by the barn once again – each time we stayed never felt like enough time, and each time that we left, I immediately began to look forward to the next time. At this point, we had been stopping by to see Barley at least a couple or few times each moon, for the last three or four moons.

Even now as I was growing older, our visits there made me as giddy as a little kit – I loved climbing its hay bales, chasing said endless amounts of mice, looking at the view from the roof, and of course, Barley and Ravenpaw had become very dear to me with their warm energy and very kind hearts.

Now, time seemed to be going in slow motion at my anticipation to leave as I then watched Chrissy lick her lips and stand up. I anxiously stood up as well, and to be honest, I was shocked by how close in size I was to my own mother. *We're nearly the same size even,* I thought, my eyes widening as I flicked my gaze back and forth between me and Chrissy. *When did that happen?*

But I quickly pulled myself away from my thoughts as I noticed Chrissy then look down at Sparrow, her eyes narrowed once again. "Are you done eating your filth?"

Sparrow rolled his eyes, beginning to walk ahead of the both of us as I let out another *mrrow* of laughter. "I'm not feeding into that, you know."

Chrissy then sighed, running ahead to flank her mate. I trailed just behind them, no longer being required to walk in between them, as I listened to the two of them talk in front of me. "I guess I should have known I'd have to overlook some things when I decided to be with you," my mother then muttered.

Sparrow looked to my mother, then giving her a lick on the ear as a purr seemed to rise in his throat. "Well, I'm glad that you did."

"Aw, is someone trying to be sappy?" Chrissy meowed as she flicked her mate on the ear with her tail.

"Maybe."

"Aw, that's sweet."

I then snicked quietly as my father then abruptly pulled away from touching his muzzle to my mother's, lifting his head up and puffing his chest out. "Hm, I'm still not ever admitting that thrushes are superior."

Chrissy then let out a purr, nuzzling her head into Sparrow's chest. "That's okay," she then murmured softly. "I sill love you a lot."

I then had to hold back my own purrs as my father then licked my mother's head. "I love you too, Chrissy."

I then couldn't help but shake my head in amazement, still behind my parents as we padded closer and closer to the forest I had just hunted near. While it was something that I had thought about and hoped for for the entirety of my life, it seemed to happen more and more as of late. *If I can find somebody and have half the relationship that my parents have sometime in the future, I'd be on top of the world...* I thought, my stomach filling with butterflies just at the prospect of it. *It must be so nice to have that kind of cat in your life that you can be so vulnerable and lovey-dovey with, and always have by your side...*

I then flicked my ears and raised my eyebrows as another thought crossed my mind. *I'm just over eight moons now... I wonder if I'll meet someone in the coming moons, but how?*

I then shook my head quickly, abruptly pushing those thoughts away. *As nice as that does sound... it also implies a reality that would eventually* not *include my parents...* I realized, recalling the talk that me and my parents had at the tall stone area just a few moons ago. *Finding that kind of love is not priority right now,* I told myself. *I have my parents, and that's all that I need.*

Just as these thoughts were fading away, I felt my heart practically rise with excitement as we finally arrived at the edges of the forest

where I had been just earlier – where I had hunted *very* intentionally in order to just get a *glimpse* of this area.

I had smelled so many strange scents – some of them I was certain were the strange scents of cats. *Fresh* ones. I'd almost felt an exciting feeling of danger just being around here, and was already beginning to feel it again as I trailed along with Chrissy and Sparrow.

Why? I knew that this was an area that Barley had told me that the wild cats live in.

Knowing this, I absolutely *had* to go deeper into those trees. "How about actually going into the forest?" I blurted out, looking eagerly at my parents as I ran ahead to intercept them. I then tilted my head to the side, widening my eyes just slightly. "Please?"

My mother immediately let out a grunt, slowly shaking her head. "You know that doesn't work as well now that you're older," she teased before peering past at the tall oak trees behind me, her gaze deep and pensive. "Well... I don't think that we've ever been in this area before, despite it being so close to Barley's barn."

She then looked back at Sparrow, who also seemed to be pondering with her. "I *am* curious to see what's around here."

Sparrow gave a slow nod, looking back at his mate. "I am as well, I have to admit!"

I took a step closer to my parents as I tried to keep my paws from kneading into the ground in anticipation. "Come on, what's the worst that could happen?"

With those words, Sparrow quickly shot his gaze back to me, one of his eyebrows raised. "Famous last words, Mist."

Chrissy let out a purr, then giving Sparrow a light nudge. "Well, what else can our philosophy be when we travel to unknown places and never settle down?"

Sparrow then looked back at his mate, his eyebrows now furrowed, before meowing after a few heartbeats, "Fine, Let's go."

Yes!

I then found myself taking the lead as the three of us then began to pad into the trees, the shadows and sun rays bursting through the trees casting over our pelts. I had already been to and traveled through countless amounts of forests in my life, but something about this one, knowing what I knew, made the whole thing feel so much more *thrilling* and exhilarating.

And just as I had hoped, almost as if the edge of the forest had been a barrier, as soon as we stepped into the trees, the scents I had only caught a whiff of earlier became so much stronger. If there had been any uncertainly before – I could now be certain that what I was smelling were the muffled scents of some sort of wild cats. *Holy heck...*

It was clear that my parents had also noticed the change – the both of them with their heads up in the air as they seemed to let all of the foreign scents flood through their nostrils. Sure, we every once in a while caught the scents of other cats while we traveled, but never, ever, had there been so many fresh ones at once.

Sparrow was shaking his head in amazement next to me as he looked around. "Wow, that is strong!" he exclaimed.

Chrissy then let out a sigh as she flanked me on my other side. "My goodness, you've got that right! So strong," she meowed, her head also shaking back and forth. "The fresh scent of so many cats at once..."

I then furrowed my eyebrows as Chrissy's gaze then shot over to me. "...as well as my intuition that tells me that Mist brought us here for a reason."

As Sparrow's gaze also shifted to burn into my skull, I began to flit my eyes around and shift my paws back and forth nonchalantly. "I don't know what you're talking about," I muttered, but when both of my parents continued to stare, I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes. "Come on, it's not like I want a run-in with any wild cats, I just want to look at some of the territory that Barley told me they live in!"

With those words, Sparrow let out a sigh and closed his eyes. "Fair enough," he muttered. And after exchanging a look with Chrissy, he went on. "But we have to be careful – I'm sure they wouldn't take well to strangers being even *near* their territory."

"Agreed," my mother meowed before gaping open her mouth to attempt to grasp at more scents. "It looks like no one has been through this area since a little past morning, and they hopefully don't have any reason to come around again unless they patrol their territory several times a day."

I couldn't help but flick my ears in intrigue at my mother's comment. *Patrolling,* I repeated to myself. *They wouldn't have to patrol unless they had claimed the territory as their own... that's so neat! And very different...*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts as I felt Chrissy give me a nudge. "We'll explore around for a little while, Mist," she meowed, to my absolute excitement, "but for the sake of your safety... and your desire to go see Barley tomorrow, we can't be too long. Okay?"

I then couldn't help but sigh and roll my eyes. *It's something!* "Okay..." I murmured, pretending to be annoyed despite how happy I was just to get a few more moments in this forest.

"Good!" Chrissy replied, giving a sharp nod before turning around and beginning to trot through the clearing we were in. It almost immediately became clear to me that my mother was just as excited to look around this new, strange place as I was. "Now, let's see what's around!"

And that is exactly what I did, becoming overwhelmed in the best possible way as I simply walked slowly through the forest, slowly absorbing all of my surroundings, and not being able to help continuing to absorb all of the wild cat scents. Chrissy had been right – while it was clear that they had been in this area today, it had been most of the day since they had departed.

If I was being honest, it was almost refreshing to smell different cat scents, and ones that weren't just my parents' or Barley's.

"What in the world...?"

I quickly turned around at the sound of Sparrow's voice, immediately intrigued by the utter confusion in his meow. My gaze fell on him to find him hovering over something in the grass. *Strange...*

Almost simultaneously, Chrissy and I broke from our spots and ran up to meet my father, who I now could see was staring down at a dead rabbit. All three of us seemed to take a moment to process what we were looking at before my mother finally let out a grunt and took a step back. "That is one of the weirdest things that I have ever seen..." she then muttered.

After my moment of processing, I was still very confused. "What's weird about some prey on the ground?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Well, I suppose a dead animal is nothing out of the ordinary," Chrissy answered. "However, it is clear that someone..."

She then bent down to sniff the animal. "...a cat, *killed* this animal – it didn't die on its own."

Her hazel eyes then met my gaze as she gestured to a specific part on the rabbit with her tail – a specific part that was very... *bloody*. "Do you see that gash in its neck?" After I gave her a nod, she began to shake her head as she sat down. "My question is, why did they just leave it here instead of claiming it?"

"Right – even if they were going to come back for it, they'd likely bury it," Sparrow then commented. He then let out a snort and gave a shrug. "These wild cats must be mad!"

Mad, but very, very interesting...

Obviously, with this very weird sight, we proceeded in our exploration of the forest with extreme caution. However, I personally forgot about the incident within just moments.

I could only just barely see my parents in the distance now as I decided to travel deeper into the trees, the gorge that we had come from now far in the distance, and nowhere near in sight.

And as I stood there in the sunlight, my paws in the grass, and the wind slightly blowing my fur, I suddenly wasn't sure if I'd ever felt so comfortable. *Something about several cats calling this specific place their home makes it feel so special...*

And all over again, I was basically entranced by everything that overtook my senses – the sounds of bugs and birds twirping, and creatures stirring in the bushes, and the trees and bushes rustling with the wind, and the strange, *very* strange scents that flooded through my nostrils.

In fact, there were some that I was catching that I didn't recognize in *any* capacity, and I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

I began to travel father and farther away, fully under the assumption that Sparrow and Chrissy were perfectly fine with me wandering off for just a little while. *They let me hunt on my own earlier, so this is nothing!*

I then took an abrupt pause, my heart rising with panic as I found myself having to regain my footing as I nearly tripped over something. *Shoot!*

But luckily with all of my climbing, hunting, and jumping practice, I had become quite agile, and quickly got back up onto all four of my paws. *What the heck did I just trip on?* I thought as I gave a shake of my fur.

I then felt my eyes widen as I looked down at my paws. *No way...*

I couldn't believe it, but it was *another* dead animal – a squirrel this time – on the ground, that appeared to have been killed in the exact same way that the rabbit had. It was left out in the open, for one, but it also had a very similar gash along its neck that had surely been the cause for its loss of life.

Okay... I thought as I finally decided to step over it and continue in my travels. Two of them, and they were fairly close to each other. *Do these wild cats just forget about the prey they've caught?*

I then paused once again, quickly processing a very weird, ominous

sound that I now realized I could hear from the distance. *Or... do they just wait a little bit and then devour them ravenously?*

To my complete fear, what I could hear in the distance was very clearly a mix of growling and very, very violent and vicious eating sounds. But despite my fear, I found myself pushing forward, my curiosity getting the best of me as always.

But I didn't have to look much further to discover what had been making the noise.

After peering through two bramble bushes, I was absolutely horrified to see what I recognized as two *very* large dogs, both devouring what looked like another dead rabbit that had been left their on its own.

I had seen several dogs before – if my parents and I ever traveled in small Twolegplaces, we'd every once in a while find a home with Twolegs that actually owned their own dogs – but I had never seen any sort of dogs that looked like this. These dogs were *huge*, rough-looking, and their eyes were filled with nothing but hunger as they practically *ripped* through the poor rabbit.

I could do nothing but stare for several moments. *I have never seen dogs in a place like this*, I thought to myself. *But the fact that several of these dead animals were left here, all near each other makes me wonder...*

I then just barely raised my head as I felt my mouth drop. *Wait, are these animals* bait *for these dogs? Why?*

Snap.

I then completely froze, and for one of the first times in my whole life, it suddenly felt as if death were right in front of me.

Without me even realizing it, I suppose I had shifted just slightly as I had delved into my anxious, curious thoughts, which had caused me to step on a twig.

And just as I had feared, both of the two large creatures looked up at the sound, now not showing any care towards the rabbit, who

was now just bones at this point.

But neither dog would care about that, though – they'd now found a piece of prey that was much, much larger, and a piece of prey that brought them a challenge that would make them feel much more victorious once they were able to sink their teeth into it.

Just at the same moment that I decided to run, I could suddenly hear two heavy sets of footsteps pounding just behind me, the growls of the dogs practically blocking out anything else.

And as I could even feel the two creatures' hot, thick breath on my tail, I was certain that I had never been this terrified in my entire life.

And the two creatures continued to stay right on my tail until I finally decided to take the gamble and climb up one of the several thick oak trees, attempting to let out a squeal to let Chrissy and Sparrow know that I was nearby, and in very, very grave danger.

I luckily was making it up the tree trunk very quickly, and thought that I was just heartbeats from being at least somewhat safe. But I then let out a yowl full of pain when I suddenly felt very large claws dig into my right hind leg. *Goodness gracious, I didn't think I was capable of feeling so much hurt at once!*

Although something like that would typically prevent me from doing something as simple as walking, my adrenaline and fear allowed me to keep climbing, and eventually, I made it to the lowest branch that was completely out of either dog's reach.

And to my complete surprise, relief, and fear, just a moment later I fully recognized the dark gray and dark ginger blurs that suddenly burst into sight, leaping at the dogs as if they had fought creatures *double* their size before.

I found myself screwing my eyes shut most of the time the four were fighting, praying to some higher power like I never had before, fearing the worst despite my parents' clear skill and courage.

And hearing both Chrissy and Sparrow let out yowls of pain every

once in a while certainly didn't help matters. And when I opened my eyes again, I thought that I would fall off the tree – almost numb with fear at this point as I realized that one of the dogs completely had my mother pinned to the ground, its teeth bared as it growled right in her face. *No!*

Sparrow was a few tail-lengths away fighting the other dog, and thank goodness, just a few heartbeats later, he seemed to be able to give it one last scratch across the face before it let out one final yelp and ran away.

But I then looked back at Chrissy, feeling helpless all over again as I then watched her dog bend down, grab her by the neck, and begin to shake her violently.

Sparrow quickly whipped himself around, letting out the most angry, ambitious, and determined growl that I had ever heard from him. "Chrysanthemum, don't move!" he then called out as he pelted towards his mate and the dog. "Resisting will only make it fight harder!"

Then, as my father leapt on the dog and began slashing at its back, I felt a chill run down my spine as I realized that Sparrow had called my mother by her full name – something he only did in very serious situations, or when he was very worried.

But I forced myself to continue to watch as Sparrow then creeped farther up the dog's back, and I found myself actually letting out a sigh of relief as the dark gray tom then proceeded to take his claws and slash them across the dog's eyes. This quickly caused the creature to let out a pained yowl, bringing my mother to fall to the ground.

And as Sparrow then leapt back down to the ground, prepared to defend his mate, the dog actually finally ran away, the blood from its bleeding eyes trailing behind it.

And as the dog's cries eventually faded into silence, I let out a small whimper and dug my head into the branch that I was on. Holy moly, holy moly...

"Mist? Mist, are you alright?"

I then frantically lifted my head up at the sound of Chrissy's voice, absolutely bewildered and relieved that she didn't sound hurt. "Y-yes, I'm fine!" I called down, my voice trembling as I tried to stand up.

And it was at that moment that I remembered what one of those stupid dogs had done to my back leg, and I found myself sinking back down into the branch. "Oh, except..."

At the bottom of the tree, I could very clearly see my father's dark gray eyes washing over with fear and worry as he noticed my bleeding paw. "Oh, gosh, Mist, your leg, hold on..." he meowed frantically as he then began to climb up the tree himself, stopping once he was just under the branch I was on. "Try to climb down, and *please* take your time. I'll be right under you to catch you if you slip."

I slowly nodded back at my father, having to accept that this was the only way I could get down, as I was getting much too big for either of my parents to try and carry me down. "...Okay," I breathed, not taking another moment to overthink it as I tried to make my way down.

"I'll be right back," Chrissy then called up, and I then her light pawsteps swiftly trotting away. "I'm going to try and find some herbs for that leg!"

And as my mother completely disappeared into the forest, time almost seemed to stop as I tried to slowly but surely make my way down the tree, trying to ignore the shooting pain in my leg every time that I moved it.

And I had actually made it about halfway through when I accidentally brushed it against the trunk, causing pain almost as strong as the initial infliction of the wound to shoot up my leg. *Holy hedgeapples on a heap of hogs!* I thought as I let out a hiss and tightened my grip in the tree.

If this had bothered Sparrow, he showed no indication, and was

clearly trying to stay calm as he helped me down the tree. "You can do it, Mist," he whispered softly to me. "We're almost down."

By some miracle, my father was right, and we made it down the oak tree completely after a few more moments of hesitation and struggle. As soon as I got to my paws and had to put some weight on my injured leg, pain seemed to sear through my entire *body* this time, and I actually found myself having to swallow down the bile that was rising in my throat.

Sparrow quickly caught me as I fell to my side, and helped me to lie down right where I was in the grass. "Oh, Mist, I am so sorry," he sighed as he began to stroke my flank comfortingly. "Just stay there, and try not to put weight on it."

Both of us then flicked ours as the rustles of bushes came from the distance, and just a moment after that, I looked up to see my mother emerging from some bushes, her jaws filled with herbs. "Oh, thank gosh," my father then sighed as he moved out of the way, allowing my mother to drop all of her herbs right in front of me.

She then picked out one of the herbs – something that looked like a yellow flower petal – towards my father. "Here, you know the drill – chew that up for me," she meowed sharply. She then glanced over to me, her eyes urgent but warm. "Honey, can you try and stretch your leg out just a little bit?"

Darn it. With my teeth clenched, I slowly and reluctantly extend my injured leg. With how much doing that was already *killing* me, I hoped that I had done it far enough to let my mother do her thing.

I then kept my teeth clenched as she then proceeded to give my leg a few licks, and then dab what looked like clumped-up cobwebs across my wound. "It's been a while, but thank goodness this remedy stuck. Sparrow?" She then took the chewed herbs that my father had been working on and spread it over my wound. "That should ease the pain a little bit, and prevent it from getting infected."

She then took a step back, giving a sharp nod. "Something my own mother taught me. How does that feel?"

Still trying to power through the pain, I still managed to give my parents a spirited nod. "As good as it can feel, I guess!"

With those words, Chrissy let out a sigh, her eyes washing over with sympathy as she brushed her tail against my cheek. "You poor thing," she meowed softly before looking over her shoulder at the forest around us. "As much as I wish that we could make ourselves scarce with those dogs wandering this territory, I don't want to make Mist move another muscle with her injury."

She then very slowly looked back at where we were settled under the large oak tree. "It looks like we'll have to stay here for the night."

"I agree, unfortunately," Sparrow then breathed, looking just as uncertain as his mate did. "We'll just have to keep watch, and hope that we scared them away long enough for us to escape tomorrow while we can, with Mist's injury permitting."

With those words, I let my head fall to the ground as an overwhelming amount of guilt seemed to flow through my body. "I'm so sorry!" I suddenly burst out. "I really shouldn't have wandered off like that, and it got me into so much trouble."

I then took a quick glance at our place under the oak tree, feeling my heart continue to sink as I realized that we were almost completely exposed. "*And* now it's keeping us from being able to travel or stay out of danger," I then nearly whimpered. "I'm *so*, so sorry."

To my surprise, my mother simply let out another sigh, stroking my cheek with her tail once again. "It really is okay, Mist," she meowed, the warmth and reassurance in her voice sounding genuine.

"I beg to differ-"

To my amusement, Chrissy raised her tail to silence my father's words. She then flashed him a humored, but warning look, and after he took a step back, she looked back at me. "You are growing up, and you are also old enough to be able to go off on your own if you want to. At this point..." She then looked back at Sparrow, her

eyes narrowed but gleaming. "We only freak out about you going off on your own because we love you and want to protect you for all of eternity, even if that's not possible."

Her and Sparrow then shared a purr of amusement. "Bottom line," she then continued. "It really is alright, and you most *certainly* could not help running into those two dogs."

Sparrow then sniffed, already seeming to calm down from his initial anger at me wandering off. "You had said that you didn't want a run-in with wild cats – did you want a run-in with dogs instead?"

After me and my mother let out another purr, she then narrowed her eyes as she looked out to the forest once again. "Still speaking of those dogs... I typically would be very surprised to see those idiots in a forest like this – Barley has never mentioned or warned us about dogs in this area either – *but*..."

She then looked worriedly back at the two of us. "After seeing those dead animals sprawled everywhere... I'm almost certain that those dogs were lured here."

I nearly let out a gasp, so excited that my mother had come to the same conclusion that I had. "That's what I thought too!" I expressed out loud. I then took the chance to express my *confusion*. "But why?"

"Gosh, who's to say?" Sparrow sighed as he gave a lash of his fluffy tail. "No matter the motivation, it proves that this territory is very dangerous, and also that..." I then was surprised to see him look back at me, his gray eyes narrowed and urgent. "If we ever run into this situation again, we have to make sure that Mist is ready to defend herself."

This time, I actually did gasp, and I had to ignore another shooting pain through my leg with my sudden movement. "Fighting lesson once we get to Barley's barn?"

"It's a deal!" Chrissy exclaimed. She then took a step closer to me and began to stroke my head with her tail. "Now try and get some rest, my love – that poultice mixed with some good sleep should help that wound heal in no time." She then bent down to actually

lick my head once again. "Goodnight. Your father and I will be right here keeping watch."

"Okay, goodnight, mother," I purred, taking in my mother's scent before then touching my muzzle to Sparrow's cheek. "Goodnight, father."

"Goodnight, Mist," he immediately replied. He then flicked my ear with his tail. "We love you so much."

"I love you both too," I then meowed softly as I watched my parents begin to walk over to their spots. I then flicked my ears as I remembered something else that I wanted to say. "Mother? Father?"

Both of them immediately paused and looked back, both of their gazes suddenly full of concern and worry.

But I quickly flashed them a reassuring look as I gave them a nod. "Thank you so much for saving me."

To my amusement, Chrissy sighed with relief, exchanging a warm look with Sparrow before giving me a slow nod. "Always, sweetheart," she whispered back to me before she and Sparrow then made their spots for keeping watch, and I bent my head down, ready to sleep off this crazy day.

Chapter 6

[image]

I was yanked from my sleep as violently as a wind gust blowing against a blade of grass. And as soon as my eyes opened, all of my senses seemed like one big blur – the sun blinding my vision and my hearing being slightly muffled.

I had been in a very deep sleep, my body clearly working very hard to try and heal my mental and physical wounds from yesterday. *So... what was it that managed to wake me up?*

It was just a heartbeat later when it all finally processed. *Oh, no...*

I could now very clearly hear the mix of yowling, barking and growling in the distance. That, combined with the fact that neither Sparrow nor Chrissy were here standing guard anymore, was enough to make my heart drop into my stomach. *Did those nasty dogs actually return?*

As I continued to break through my grogginess, I was quickly able to deduce that it was indeed the yowls of my parents that I heard, combined with the ferocious, angry growls of what I now knew to be dogs. *No, no, no...*

Suddenly, I felt the same helplessness and utter terror that I had felt last night, but this time, double. I finally tried to force myself to stand up, almost immediately cringing as a strong, dull pain pulsed through my back leg.

I shut my eyes in pain, hissing in frustration as I remembered that my leg was injured, and would surely hinder me from doing *anything* promptly.

However, luckily the pain was soreness more than anything, and my leg was just a little stiff – I was doing to run like I never had before if my leg gave me *any* sort of capacity. I still absolutely *dreaded* having to run on it, but was equally terrified and what I was

hearing and had to know what was going on. *I'm coming, mother and father!*

I then attempted to break into a run, almost immediately stopping to cringe as another pain shot down to my back paw. *Ugh, come on!*

But just as I was about to try again, I was completely shocked to then see the fluffy gray pelt of my father suddenly break through the bramble bushes ahead, his dark gray eyes wide as he pelted towards me. *Oh, thank goodness!* I only watched, already overwhelmed with relief as Sparrow ran up to meet me, clearly looking very shaken and out of breath.

However, that relief slowly went away when I then noticed the completely fresh wounds along his flank, and also the fact that Chrissy was not with him. "Father?" I cried out, my leg giving out for a moment as I tried to take a step towards him. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

Sparrow quickly caught my weight, letting me fall against his flank. A chill nearly ran down my spine as I felt all of the blood that was spread all over his flank, and the blood that I unfortunately could be sure was his. "The dogs are back, Mist," he panted, his voice full of tension with pain. "This time, it looks like they've brought a third friend."

My mouth dropped open, simply walking with Sparrow as he then seemed to be leading me somewhere. "*Three* dogs?" I nearly shouted, my heart suddenly pounding at double the speed. "Is mother fighting them *by herself* right now?" That thought made me practically want to collapse and whimper into the grass, and I held my breath as I awaited my father's answer.

My heart sank again as Sparrow nodded. "Yes, which is why I have to get back as soon as I can." He then let out a sigh, his eyes still wide with worry as he looked over his shoulder – the yowls and growls ahead getting louder and louder. "I came back here to make sure that you were safe."

Then, without another word, I was completely surprised when Sparrow then whipped his head around, and then proceeded to grab

me by the scruff and carry me like a kit as he then broke into a run. He only seemed to slow down to take a quick look at the surroundings before running like his life depended on it all over again.

I then nearly let out a yelp when I was suddenly dropped, landing on dirt and being surrounded by darkness. My nostrils then filled with the scents of new creatures – stale, luckily, and the light from the sun leaked through a hole above – where I assumed I had been dropped from.

I then flicked my ears in bewilderment as I then processed the fact that Sparrow had just dropped me into what appeared to be an old rabbit or fox hole. "Father, what are you doing?" I called up to him as he peered down into the hole.

"Keeping you away!" he immediately answered, looking over his shoulder every couple of heartbeats.

I could hardly believe it, and began to shake my head urgently as my mouth dropped open again. "*What?* But I want to help!"

"No, Mist!" Sparrow then nearly growled. "I'm not letting them lay a claw on you if I can help it!"

"That's ridiculous!" I called up, my voice nearly a growl as well. "There's no way you and mother can take on three of those by yourselves!"

I actually did then feel a bit comforted as Sparrow let out a snort, and he seemed to have given a lash of his tail. "With all of the creatures we've run into in the past, we sure as heck can try." Then, just as he was about to say something else, he cut himself off as the very clear yowl of my mother came from the distance. I could barely hear it from where I was, but it was enough for me to feel like I was being deafened.

After screwing my eyes shut for a moment, I opened my eyes to see Sparrow already backing away from the hole. "Stay here, Mist. *Please!*"

"Wait!" I then cried out once again, hating to delay my father, but also hating the fact that I was being left here all alone to simply worry and wonder. "How am I supposed to know that you and mother are okay?"

Sparrow stopped in his tracks, looking back and flashing me a sympathetic glance. "I will come and get you as soon as Chrissy and I have fought the dogs off, I promise," he meowed softly. And honestly, I could not imagine how much strength it was taking him to say those words as calmly as he was. He then actually bent down into the hole, quickly touching his muzzle to my head. "For now, just be patient, Mist. We'll be back soon."

Then, before I could say anything else at all, Sparrow vanished like a firefly's light at dawn, and I truly had never, ever, felt so scared or alone.

And I had been told to stay here, scared and alone, simply having to live with the fact that my parents were off fighting very dangerous creatures, and there was nothing that I could do to affect the situation or even know what was going on. *I truly don't think that there is a more horrible feeling...*

With everything in my power I was trying to cling onto the fact that my parents were the toughest and bravest cats in the entire world, and after seeing their dauntless behavior last night, I could be sure that they would fight these three brutes with everything that they had.

I then let out a long, shaky sigh as I lied down, the pain in my leg making it very difficult to stand for even a moment. But is that enough?

A chill then ran down my spine as my father's words from earlier rang into my head once again. *With all of the creatures we've run into in the past, we sure as heck can try.*

I then found myself screwing my eyes shut again. *Try...* I repeated. *Try, not do. I think Sparrow was trying to be comforting with those words, but* trying *implies a chance of no success.*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath and open my eyes. *Wondering at this point is... well, pointless*, I tried to tell myself. *All I can do is wait.*

My father's words then echoed in my head once again. *For now, just be patient, Mist. We'll be back soon.*

I then gave the slightest nod, trying to stay calm despite still being able to hear the mangles of yowls and growls in the distance. *Just be patient, Mist. You've been practicing for it all of your life.*

However, trying to be patient didn't make those yowls and growls any less unbearable as they seemed to stretch on for infinity. I continued to hear them as the sun moved above me in the sky.

But what became more unbearable, was the silence that came after. All that I could now hear were leaves being brushed by the wind, and wren birds chirping up in the trees.

As soon as I had processed this, my curiosity brought me to stand up. *Did... did Sparrow and Chrissy fight the dogs off?*

For a moment, my heart lifted a little as I was filled with hope. Are they on their way to get me? They hadn't come back as soon as the forest had gone silent, so I assumed, I had *hoped*, that they were maybe taking some time to nip their wounds in the bud, and if the both of them were injured, they would probably take a while to help each other back to the hole I was waiting in.

This is what I tried to keep circulating in my head, continuing to be patient as day turned into night.

But neither of them had come by the time I could see the moon high in the sky, and by the time the fireflies returned and the crickets began to chirp.

It had now felt like eons and eons of silence with no signs of life at all.

Although hope still throbbed in my chest, my heart felt immensely heavy as I finally forced myself to stand up, my leg only hurting slightly less as I then climbed out of the hole.

It was almost completely pitch black outside except for the small specks of light from the fireflies. I tried to focus on the calmness of the night and the sounds of cricket chirping as I then began to limp through the forest. I would have taken any other distraction or feeling to shift my head away from the overwhelming amount of dread that I currently felt.

I had to force myself to calm down, as I had to have a clear mind in order to assess whatever scene I would confront.

Quickly, I had to hold back a whimper as the horrible scent of blood then flooded through my nostrils – both cat and dog blood.

Unfortunately for me, that is the tamest thing I would discover. As I continued to limp ahead, I then began to notice the clumps of fur scattered about. *Dark gray and dark ginger fur...* I thought, screwing my eyes shut for a moment. *There's dog fur everywhere too, but...*

I then came to some very tall shrubs, and I couldn't see anything beyond them. However, I had a very horrible hunch that I knew what was on the other side.

Nevertheless, I forced myself to limp on and crawl through the shrubs, my head down the entire time.

And my head was *still* down once the last of the shrubs brushed against my tail. My eyes then screwed shut as my paws then stepped into what felt like mud. *Mud that certainly wasn't wettened by water...* And then the stenches of blood and death became more unbearable than I ever could have thought possible.

My head was still facing the ground, and I found that I liked it that way. I began to shake my head as I held back a whimper, lying down and covering my eyes with my paws. *For goodness sake, I can't look, I can't look, I can't do it!*

But eventually, I did look up. I wasn't too sure what finally brought me to do it, but I suppose knowing already what I was likely to find made it a little less scary, as horrible as it sounded.

And as I finally lifted my head and looked ahead at the sight in

front of me, finding that worst possible sight that I had been prepared to find – I felt completely numb. Suddenly, the large wound on my leg felt like just a pesky thorn in my paw.

And as I stared ahead at the bodies of my parents that were ripped to shreds, I was overwhelmed with grief, but with guilt as well as this sight processed.

I had tried to be patient, but it just might have been the cost of my parents' lives.

Chapter 7

[image]

The next few days were absolutely insufferable.

After I had discovered the bodies of my parents, I had done nothing but sob as I lied next to them, so overwhelmed with grief and wishing more than anything that my body would just sink into the ground beneath me. My throat was burning, and my head was practically pounding from how much I had been whimpering.

I was also experiencing the most horrible cycle – being so distraught and shocked that I couldn't believe it was all real, hoping that it actually wasn't real, and becoming just as distraught and shocked when I processed the fact that it *was* real.

My parents were dead, and I had lost them in one of the most horrible ways possible.

It had been nighttime when I found Chrissy and Sparrow, and I was there being consumed by sadness until morning broke. I don't even know how, but I finally pushed myself to stand up after having laid down with my head in my paws for the entire night. I had looked at my parents again, took another moment to wait out another horrible wave of grief, and then proceeded to limp a few tail lengths away so that I could begin to weakly dig into the ground.

And from that morning until sunhigh, I dug two large holes into the ground, and from sunhigh until the next night, I tried with all of my might – both mentally and physically - to drag both Chrissy and Sparrow into each hole, and then proceed to cover their bodies with dirt.

I was still very young, however, I was already certain that that was the most emotionally draining, most unnerving, and the most upsetting thing that I would ever have to do, and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

And for days after that, I didn't move from those burial spots. Those evil, *evil* dogs never came back, but that honestly didn't matter to me now. The damage had been done.

Whether or not Chrissy and Sparrow had actually been able to fight the dogs off before they died, I wasn't sure. All that I knew now was that I hated those mangy creatures with every fiber in my body.

These first few days of absolute grief, I had to admit, were incredibly exhausting and left me feeling completely numb. I could not fathom a universe where I would be able to feel any positive emotion – how could I? What would there ever be to be happy about when I had lost the both of my parents in such a tragic way?

So, for those first few days, after I'd settled by Chrissy and Sparrow's burial spots, I didn't move, eat, drink, and only slept when my body absolutely forced me to.

But I eventually transitioned from being able to do nothing but sink into my grief, to being desperate to find anything in order to distract me from my grief.

I still don't know how I managed it, but I forced myself to move on. As much as I hated to leave where I knew my parents still were, I knew that they would want me to continue traveling as if they were still with me.

However, now, here I was, standing numbly in a rocky clearing, only having traveled for a quarter of a day and having absolutely no idea where to go. *And no motivation to go there at all...*

Of course, my first instinct had been to go see Barley and Ravenpaw – the two only other cats that were in my life and meant so much to me... *but not right now...* I told myself, my head so incredibly foggy with sleep deprivation and grief. *How would I even face them? And seeing them would mean that I would have to tell them the news.*

I then screwed my eyes shut, holding back a whimper. *Things are still so, so fresh, and telling them makes it feel even more real...*

After I opened my eyes again, I then forced myself to take at least a

few pawsteps forward. *I will live in denial as long as I possibly can*, I then thought, the warm sun casting on my back as I traveled through the forest.

Along with that, I couldn't even fathom the fact that I hadn't been around when it all happened, simply *waiting* in a *hole* as my parents were ripped to shreds. *I did absolutely* nothing *as they were killed*, I then thought, my eyes welling up with sadness for the hundredth time in the past few days. *Sparrow told me to stay put, but I shouldn't have listened... I should have chased after them and fought with them.*

I then shut my eyes once again, trying to fight off another unbearable wave of grief as I relived the situation all over again. *There is no way that I could face Ravenpaw and Barley right now. What if they think it's all my fault?*

I then stopped my tracks. *What if it is all my fault?*

I then couldn't help but practically fall to the ground, this wave practically consuming me as my head began to spiral. I knew for a fact that Sparrow and Chrissy were outnumbered, and that the worst would likely happen, yet I stood back while they took those three dogs on by themselves.

And the only reason why I had stayed back was because of a stupid wound on my leg.

And now with that leg being the least of my worries, it made me believe even more that I should have completely ignored it and should have fought beside my parents no matter *what* hindrance I'd had. *And even if all three of us hadn't been able to fight off the dogs, I would have been with them... we would have all been together one last time...*

I then buried my head into my paws again. *Oh my goodness, it's too much... it's too much...*

And after lying there, whimpering and being consumed by sadness for what felt like days, even thought it was just a few moments, I forced myself to stand up again. *There is no way I could face Barley or Ravenpaw right now,* I concluded, as much as I hated to admit it.

Maybe after a few quarter moons or so, but not right now...

I then felt the slightest pang of regret after that thought, and ultimately let out a hiss of frustration. *Ugh, how is it that I could so desperately want to be alone, but want to be surrounded by so much support and comfort at the same time?*

But despite that, I suppose I decided that being alone right now was for the best. Was it *actually* for the best? I didn't have the capacity to think it through.

All I felt that I could do for now was let my paws lead me wherever they felt like doing so.

~>~>~>~>~

The air around me was cold, and a violent chill ran down my spine as a bone-chilling breeze brushed against my fur. Below the tall boulder I stood on, the dying grass slowly leaned to its side, and the leaves of the tress that were now so many different colors shivered.

Well... I thought, sitting down on the cold stone. *I thought that I would be able to be excited about my second leaf-fall approaching, but something about the cold and the falling leaves isn't bringing me up at all this time...*

I then brushed off a yellow leaf that had fallen onto my shoulder with my tail. *And it only shows how much time has passed, yet... I'm still hurting like I never have before...*

It was still crazy to me that I had begun my travel on my own right in the middle of Greenleaf, and now, that seemed far, far behind me as the trees began to change colors and the extreme heat abruptly went away. And truthfully, although it had felt like an infinite amount of seasons that I had traveled, and an infinite amount of seasons since I had lost Chrissy and Sparrow, it had very likely only been a moon – plus another half moon at the most.

And that moon plus another half moon had felt like... *torture*.

As one would expect, I was *constantly* consumed by grief – not only the grief that obviously came from losing the two cats most dear to

me, my *parents*, but also, grief that came from leaving their burial spots.

Deep down, I knew that I had made the right choice of forcing myself to continue on; I had to remind myself that that's what my parents would want me to do, but at the same time, I was consumed by some irrational guilt that told me that I was forgetting my parents by leaving them.

But I already knew that that was dumb, because everything, *everything*, made me think of them.

I couldn't stand to be in any area that was even remotely familiar to me – although I was still fairly young, we had traveled to so many placed together, and I always happened to run into somewhere that I quickly recognized. From there, so many memories of Chrissy and Sparrow would immediately overwhelm my brain – the conversations and jokes that we had, the races that I would watch them do, the meals that we shared... Somehow, even places that weren't even remotely familiar to me reminded me of them somehow.

But what else could I do? I still hadn't mustered up the courage to face Ravenpaw or Barley – another thing consuming me being the guilt that I felt still for not fighting beside my parents – but at the same time, I *hated* being this alone, and doing it for over a moon now hadn't made things feel any better.

All I had done for that moon was wander... *aimlessly*. I honestly would only travel for a bit of each day before becoming so mentally exhausted that all I felt that I could do was sink to the ground and simultaneously sink into my grief and guilt. So... I suppose that I got to settle in many different places.

I had slept up in the trees on tree branches, within tree trunks that had a big enough space, in the plains under the stars... whatever was around when I decided I couldn't take it anymore.

And although it was likely safest, I never, ever slept inside of caves, holes, or dens. I couldn't bring myself to do it.

In fact, I found I liked it best when I slept up in high places – it was also fairly safe, but I also was able to see what was going on around me. So, taking moments to stand on large boulders, looking at the dawn view like I was now was oddly calming. *Much, much better than being trapped and oblivious...*

Once I had gotten my bearings, I finally leapt down from the boulder, deciding that I would travel just a bit more before seeking out a place to settle for the night.

The wind continued to brush my fur as I traveled through a small clearing surrounded by brambles. I actually vaguely remembered this area, and recalled that it actually wasn't too far from the forest where Barley had told me that the wild cats are... *where the dogs attacked... where Sparrow and Chrissy...*

I then screwed my eyes shut, giving a shake of my head. *Stop. Find a place to sleep, Mist.*

Ruthlessly pushing down my grief, I forced myself to lift my chin and glance up at the trees above. *Tonight feels like another night to maybe sleep up on a branch again, but which one-*

I then nearly let out a startled yelp as I nearly tripped on something in front of me. *What in the...*

I quickly looked down at my paws, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as I immediately recognized the dead squirrel below me. *With a slash through its neck... when and where does it end?*

At this point, I was nothing but annoyed when I ran into these, as I had run into them *countless* times already in the past moon. Not only did they remind me of the beginning of the horrible storm that had brought me to lose my parents, but I still had *no* idea why these were here.

I then let out a long huff and gave another shake of my head. *Well, I know why they're here, but I don't have the foggiest idea as to why any cat would want to lure dogs anywhere.*

Luckily for me, I had not run into a single dog since I was on my

own, I most certainly had scented them and ran away as quickly as I could. *Which is exactly what I'm going to do now,* I thought dismissively as I pushed the squirrel aside with my paw and pelted forward.

To be honest, while it was very hard to ever feel fully fulfilled or happy these days, breaking into a run was something that seemed to make all of my worries go away for just a moment, with all of your surroundings simply brushing past you as you sped ahead.

And not to mention, with my leg now fully healed, it of course was very nice to be able to run without any physical pain.

And it seemed as if I had only run for a few moments, however, when I finally skid to an abrupt stop, the sun only casting the last bits of its light on the thunderpath that was just tail-lengths ahead of me. *Whoa...*

A thunderpath was another thing that I had not seen any signs of since I had been alone. And already, I was trying with all of my might to push down all of the memories I had of me and my parents having our little adventures crossing the thunderpath. *They were so nervous about me crossing that I never had the chance to fully cross it by myself, but now I have no choice...*

I then gave a flick of my ears. *That is, if I actually choose to cross it. I suppose that I don't have to.*

However, for some reason, I was feeling a strange tug to.

Already, my nose was crinkling from the strange, *completely* unfamiliar scents that I was catching – monsters mingled what smelled like crowfood, Twoleg food, and countless other scents that I had been able to catch whenever Chrissy, Sparrow and I had traveled near a Twolegplace.

Clearly, beyond this thunderpath was a place that was very new and very strange to me. A place unlike anywhere that I had been before. *A place unlike anywhere that I have been before...* I then repeated in my mind. *Why isn't that as terrifying of a thought as I thought it would be?*

But I then forced myself to mentally pull back, but actually also taking a pawstep back as something occurred to me. *Wait a moment...* I then thought as I gaped my mouth open to further take in these new scents. *I very well could be wrong, but am I headed in the direction of that weird, big Twolegplace that I could see to the right of Barley's barn?*

I then felt a chill run down my spine. *The one that he told me was very dangerous, and that I should stay away from?* I thought worriedly. *But...*

I then took a deep breath, looking ahead as if I could see the Twolegplace right in front of me. *Barley can't mean the entire Twolegplace, right? And it's likely that I'll only travel through it. Besides...*

I then took another deep breath as I looked over my shoulder at the forest behind me. *As much as I've always felt a tug towards the forest, I... I just can't... there are too many memories here. I need to escape.*

I then looked back towards the thunderpath. *I need to get out of here.*

Then, after one final deep breath, I took a step forward, looked to my left and then to my right to make sure that the thunderpath was clear, and then proceeded to pelt across to the other side, more than ready to escape from my sadness, my grief, and all of the memories for just a little while.

Chapter 8

[image]

As determined as I had initially been to cross that thunderpath and begin my travels towards a place unlike any I'd ever known, I was not prepared at all when I reached the edge of the forest later that day.

The last of the oak trees loomed behind me as I stared at yet another thunderpath just tail-lengths away, but this time, the other side of it didn't have more forest at the end of it.

Rather, everything looked so new and unfamiliar that I was almost certain that I was dreaming – thunderpaths that practically seemed to pile on top of each other or cross through each other, monsters pelting back and forth and overtaking almost all of my senses, Twolegs swarming everywhere, and Twoleg nests triple the size of any that I had seen before.

It was almost too much for me, and for a split heartbeat, I was more than set on turning back.

But my paws didn't let me, and I didn't move. *This is nothing like what I know,* I reminded myself as I actually took a pawstep forward. *You can escape from your grief for just a little while, and start new.*

Then, as I took another step forward towards the thunderpath, I couldn't help but cringe as several different stenches flooded through my nostrils. *Geez, and I thought that the wild cats' territory had overbearing smells... but this is ridiculous,* I thought to myself as I then ran up to the thunderpath, beginning to look both ways as the zooming monsters left a gust that brushed my fur. *Too many smells, and too many of them unfamiliar...*

After a few moments of blocking out the pungent smells and simultaneously waiting for the monsters to clear out, a chill ran down my spine as my surroundings became significantly quieter,

and the thunderpath in front of me became empty.

A chill ran down my spine as I slightly crouched down, preparing to pelt forward. *Here we go...*

Then, without giving it another thought, and not even checking the thunderpath again, I ran forward, not wanting to waste another moment by double-checking.

But that unfortunately had been to my detriment.

I was just about halfway across the thunderpath when I suddenly noticed a bright red monster running straight towards me from my left. My heart immediately seemed to leap into my throat as I did the only thing I could think to do – keep going and hope that it missed me.

And thank goodness, that's exactly what happened, its red pelt just barely brushing against my tail. *Holy moly...*

I didn't have even a heartbeat to collect myself as I continued across the second half. Unfortunately, after my fiasco with the first monster, I had had no time to notice the monster that was now approaching me from the other direction.

Shoot!

And I nearly suppressed a terrified whimper as I realized that there was no dodging it this time – it was either try and still make a run for it, or freeze and take the blow.

And thank goodness, I didn't even have to make a choice, the monster actually *coming to a stop* just about a fox-length in front of me, a gust of air brushing my fur as it paused abruptly.

I had no idea what to do. *Do I fight it? Scratch it? Ignore it?* I asked myself. I had never, ever seen a monster stop for another creature before.

Then, the monster continued to amaze me as it then let out a piercing, high-pitched yelp sound that made me airborne for just a moment.

And just from that, I quickly made my choice, letting out a startled yelp and finishing my travel across the thunderpath, practically diving into the small patch of grass that lied between the thunderpath behind me and the next one.

And for a moment, I could do nothing but lie in that grass, trying to process just how much had happened within a few heartbeats, and trying to remind myself that I was alive. I truly hadn't feared for my life *that* much since I had fallen from that large boulder as a kit, *or when...*

I then screwed my eyes shut as I began to get up onto my paws, certain images from just moons... *days* ago beginning to flash into my head. *Nope, stop. We're not here to think about that,* I asserted to myself as I gave a shake of my fur.

But goodness gracious, I then thought as I looked back over my shoulder at the thunderpath behind me, which was now filled with monsters once again. *I hope that I never have to experience something like that again...*

I then let out a sigh as I glanced back forward, seeing all of the thunderpaths that likely lied ahead. *But it's very likely that I will...*

Then, after another deep breath and taking a few moments to calm down, I gaped my mouth open, also letting my gaze flit around in every which direction as I finally took the time to process my surroundings a second time. And while the looming buildings, the abundant amount of Twolegs and the fast-moving monsters would seem intimidating to any cat – after what I had just been through, I practically felt numb to all of it.

And I was barely phased as I moved forward, taking a glance up at the Twoleg nests that seemed to stretch infinitely up into the sky, and the bright morning sun trying to break past them. *Well, here I am.*

I found myself walking on a thunderpath that was significantly thinner than any that I had seen, that held Twolegs as opposed to monsters, and had these large nests along the side of them.

I already felt so out of place, and I couldn't even imagine how any furry creature could live here. Where were the trees? The grass? The water? There were small patches that I could see from a distance, but nowhere near enough for many creatures to be able to live comfortably with.

But despite all of that, *it doesn't remind me of my past at all.* I reminded myself yet again as I excitedly continued to look around. *But I do agree with Barley that this place definitely seems a little dangerous. When I return to his barn one day, I suppose I'll have to let him know he was proven right?*

I then slowed my pace just slightly as something crossed my mind, something I was shocked I hadn't thought about before, *How does Barley even know? Hasn't he lived at that barn his entire life?*

I then dismissively shook my head, not having the time or ability to drone on that question. *There's really no telling, and for all I know, he just decided to explore like I am,* I rationalized. *I'll ask him the next time that I see him.*

Right now, I had to focus on figuring out where I was going, and how long I was going to be there. *Well, it's not like this territory is exactly small... I'll be here for a few days at least.*

Along with that, I also was finding myself having to concentrate on stepping around Twolegs. Or, rather, keeping *them* from stepping *on* me. Some of them were completely ignoring me as I tried to navigate around them, some simply glanced down at me...

And thank goodness, none of them tried to touch me. I didn't really have a problem with Twolegs unless they made that choice...

But either way, I had to admit that I was a bit overwhelmed with all of the chaos of the swarming Twolegs and the monsters running back and forth next to me, and I quickly decided that I was going to try and find a calmer place to travel through.

I honestly thought that a task like that would take *days* with how crazy my surroundings were, but conveniently, I only had to travel a few more pawsteps before my peripheral vision caught a pretty

wide gap in between two very tall Twoleg nests. It was very, very dark, but I also could very easily see the light and another small thunderpath on the other side.

And as my eyes began to adjust to the darkness ahead, I could just barely make out lots of large, blocky objects on each side of the path, but they were nothing I couldn't swerve around. *I'm very, very good at swerving now...*

I quickly stepped out of the main path that the Twolegs were taking, and then taking a deep breath as I took my first steps into the darkness.

But I almost immediately stopped as a new, yet very familiar scent flooded into my nostrils.

And I couldn't tell if it brought me panic or relief. *Cat...* I quickly realized. *But I cannot tell for the life of me if it's fresh with how many other stenches I'm still processing.*

I then forced myself to keep going. *I can't be sure until I go on. All I can do is see for myself.*

Trying to block out even the tiniest twinges of fear that began to rise up inside of me, I padded deeper and deeper down the path, the brightness from behind slowly beginning to dim as I made my way through. And as the smell of cat grew stronger, and yet everything around me getting darker, I practically could hear my heart pounding in my ears as the other side seemed to be a lifetime away.

But I tried to cling onto my determination as I figured that I was now just about halfway through, and I could now more clearly make out what was waiting for me on the other side. It was another small thunderpath with just as many Twolegs traveling on top of it, which wasn't ideal...

But at least there, I could *see* what was going on.

Luckily now, my surroundings were becoming a bit clearer as the light from the other side came through. And out of my eagerness to get out of here, I began to quicken my pace.

But suddenly I stopped as abruptly as I would if a piece of rope had wrapped itself around my neck and pulled me backwards – a hoarse, but booming voice echoing through the area.

"Hey!"

I then stiffened, my claws instinctively sliding out as I then heard pawsteps quickly approach me. *Stay calm, Mist.*

I then forced myself to slowly turn around and face the voice, my claws still out as the cat in front of me then spoke again. "What are you doing here?"

Despite my immense fear, I still felt like I couldn't move, and that I needed to stand my ground. Chrissy, Sparrow and I had been confronted by other loners and rogues all of the time – it came with traveling to new places as much as we did. *Which means that our adventures surely brought us to have a little spat once in a while...*

I then shifted uncomfortably, having to fight a strong pang of grief and quickly push it away as I decided what to tell this mangy gray she-cat – what we had always told cats that questioned us. "I'm just passing through," I tried to meow as confidently as I could.

But on the inside, my stomach was twisting upside down as I became surprised by my own voice, which actually sounded hoarser, but also older and more mature than the last time I'd heard it. *When was the last time that I've had to talk...?*

This stranger quickly interrupted my thoughts, growling, "I don't care. Get out of here." I then was surprised as she simply gave a lash of her tail and began to walk away. "And if you even *think* about touching us or any of our food, it'll be the last thing that you ever do."

Sounds like a great deal to me, I thought, giving a nod and beginning to walk away as nonchalantly as I could make it appear.

But wait... I then thought as I took a quick glance behind me. *Am I mistaken, or did she say "our" food?*

I then began to scan my eyes around the tunnel, and I quickly found

myself having to suppress a chill running down my spine as I could just barely see two new pairs of eyes staring at me through the darkness.

At that point, I broke into a run. *If I hadn't already received a signal telling me to get out of here, that would be it!*

And going that quickly, I made it out to the other side just another moment later, the light of the sun never truly feeling so comforting or welcoming.

But that comfort only lasted a moment, with me looking to my left and becoming completely startled as I noticed two more cats beside me, eating out of what looked like a shiny, metal tree trunk.

I hadn't noticed them at *all* initially, but once I had, I had let out a gasp in surprise that unfortunately had caught their attention, causing them to both lift their heads out of the trunk.

Once again, I felt like I shouldn't run away, and I only waited in extreme anticipation as the both of them – a dark brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes and a black tom with orange eyes – stared indignantly back at me. "Excuse you," the tabby eventually muttered after a long heartbeat, her eyes narrowing.

I took a pawstep back. "Um, sorry..." I murmured calmly as I gave a shake of my fur. "You both startled me, that's all."

I then was surprised to hear the tom let out a sniff as he exchanged an amused glance with his tabby friend. "Yeah, you look like the kind that'd be startled," he then muttered as he then looked at me up and down.

I raised my eyebrows and gave a flick of my ears, surprised to see yet another cat being so blatantly rude. "Excuse *me?*" I nearly hissed, not having that comment at all.

"Let's just say that with that light fluffy fur, that pretty face, and that jumpy disposition..." the tabby then purred, also giving me a questionable glance, "It's much easier to picture you being *intimidated* as opposed to *intimidating*."

I simply let out a huff as I gave a lash of my tail, already being certain that these two were being snarky just for the heck of it. "Well, I think you're jumping to conclusions."

The two strangers then exchanged another glance, seeming shocked that I'd talked back to them.

The black tom then looked back at me, his eyes narrowed but a bit warmer now. "Well, either way, I know you're not from around here because I've never seen you before. Where are you from?"

I couldn't help but then let out the smallest sigh of relief, for some reason feeling so satisfied to be having at least somewhat of a tame conversation with someone else. "Um... well, nowhere, and everywhere?" I stammered in reply, having no idea how to explain the fact that I never settled or made a home anywhere.

And as I expected, both cats looked immensely confused, and I attempted to fix my answer. "I just left the forest," I said instead.

I then felt yet another pang of grief rush through my body just *uttering* the word *forest*, but tried to shake it away once again as I then muttered with my head down, "and... after what I've experienced there, I don't think I'm necessarily scared of a place like this..."

I then forced myself to look up again as I noticed the two cats exchange yet another glance, before the tabby she-cat glanced back down at me. "Oh, you ain't seen *nothing* yet, young one."

I then actually found myself letting out a snort as she then bent her head back down into the trunk. "Good luck."

The tom eventually did the same, giving me a nod before also bending his head back down. "Or rest in peace."

Please.

And with that, I rolled my eyes and moved on, now becoming certain that I wasn't going to be receiving a warm welcome from my own kind here. *And... it sure seems like there are a lot of them here – I've run into five within the span of a few moments!* I realized. *But so*

far, they seem to be all bark and no bite...

I then found myself slowing my pace as I then realized that I could hear the two cats still talking behind me – this time to each other. *And here's more of the bark...*

Their meows were very muffled, but I was able to make out pretty much everything. "Yeah, I've definitely never seen that she-cat before," I heard the tabby she-cat meow. "Do you think that she's sticking around?"

"I have no idea," the black tom then replied. "Does it matter though? Does she even seem like a threat?"

I tried to fight off my irritation at that comment in order to concentrate on the she-cat's next words. "Well... sometimes looks can be deceiving," she said to my satisfaction. "And I have heard that those forest cats can be tough."

I flicked my ears at those words. *Does she mean the wild cats?*

I couldn't dwell on that question, unfortunately. "Also, if she's here for more than a day, she's surely going to be eating, right?" the she-cat quickly continued.

"*What?*" the tom then exclaimed in alarm – something I definitely heard clearly. "She can't take our food!"

"Exactly," the she-cat then meowed sharply, yet it was still very muffled as I slowly got farther and father away. "Maybe we should tell... about her?"

My stomach twisted at those words as I decided to quicken my pace. *Tell who?* I wondered irritably, the most vital word being the one I had missed. *Why does anyone need to tell anyone about anyone?*

I then narrowed my eyes, taking one last glance over my shoulder at the two cats before proceeding down the small thunderpath, continuing to navigate past Twolegs. *The cats around here seem particularly territorial, and don't seem to respond well to newcomers...* I pondered. *They seem to spot a newcomer pretty quickly, as if every cat around here knows each other and would easily spot a stranger... and*

they don't respond well to those strangers.

I then let out a sniff as I continued to dive deeper into my thoughts. *The way these cats work actually seems somewhat similar to what Barley told me about the wild cats, but... something about this seems a little stranger.*

I then gave a quick shake of my head. *Much stranger...* I thought before deciding to dismiss the subject and begin to ponder my next plan of action.

"Hey!"

I came to a stop once again, giving a roll of my eyes. *Here we go again,* I thought irritably. *Am I ever going to make any progress, or am I going to be stopped a million times in one day?*

But for the third time, I figured that I would still give whoever was talking to me the time of day.

And as I turned around to face the voice, I actually found my eyes widening as I came face to face with a tom this time. He was just about my size, but had claws double the size of mine as they sank into the rocky ground.

His fur was black with a single white paw, his eyes were blue, and to my surprise, he had a collar on that was filled to the brim with what looked like dog bones. "Who are you, and what has made you think that you are allowed here?"

Chapter 9

[image]

For a few moments, I was speechless as I stared back at this mysterious cat, whose blue gaze was burning into me so strongly that I thought smoke was going to start rising from my head.

Even though I really didn't want to admit it, I was very, very intimidated by this cat. The hostile look on his face was enough, but that dog claw-filled collar around his neck certainly wasn't doing him any favors. *Although I am proving that I can be very intimidated, as those snarky cats from before seemed to think, I think that any cat would take a pawstep back after one glance at this tom...* I thought, looking at the tom up and down as subtly as I could. *He is small for his age, but that's got nothing on him.*

However, I found myself focusing on that fact as I finally took a deep breath and attempted to speak, trying to calmly repeat the method I had used earlier. "I'm sorry, I suppose I don't necessarily think that I'm allowed here... I was just passing through."

I then quickly realized that my demeanor looked quite cowardly, my head slightly lowered with my tail down. So, I forced myself to straighten up and puff out my chest just a bit, now knowing that it was vital that I stand my ground with these weird Twolegplace cats. "Is *that* allowed?" I then continued.

As I had hoped, this strange tom actually blinked in surprise, only looking daunted for a moment before letting out a hiss and taking a step closer to me. "Passing through or not, I know for a *fact* that you're not apart of BloodClan," he muttered to me through gritted teeth, his fur beginning to bristle. "And with that in mind, you are not allowed here!"

After those words, I couldn't tell if I wanted to snicker or let out an alarmed gasp. *BloodClan? Good gosh... that sounds scary to say the least...* I then thought. But now I have confirmation that these cats are indeed some sort of weird close-knit group.

But my question was, why were they all acting like this Twolegplace was theirs and theirs only? Having been a cat that had had free-reign of any area I had wanted to my entire life, I honestly couldn't fathom a group taking over an entire area and not allowing other cats in, and confronting them if they tried to get in.

I then flicked my ears as I realized something. *Huh, but that's exactly how Barley seemed to describe the wild cats too... are these a group of wild cats that Barley didn't tell me about?*

I then slightly narrowed my eyes. *Or...* the *group he didn't* want *to tell me about?*

I had to quickly shake off that thought, deciding to speak my thoughts to this tom out loud. "Last time I checked, a group of cats couldn't take over an entire city," I tried to meow confidently, luckily recalling the term these cats likely used as opposed to "Twolegplace".

"Sure. Not until I showed up," the black tom then meowed smugly as he puffed his own chest out.

I found myself raising my eyebrows. *Wait a moment...* I thought. *Is this the cat those two snarkers from earlier were talking about? The one who would apparently care to know that I was here?*

Before I could ponder that, the tom went on, taking another step closer to me. "And I decide who stays and who goes. You go."

Despite how intimidated I still was, I forced myself to also take a step towards him. "Why do I automatically have to go?"

The tom's fur continued to rise as his gaze still burned into my own. "Newcomers around here go unless I decide that they're worthwhile," he muttered tautly. Then, to my surprise, he turned around and began to walk away.

But apparently my mouth wasn't finished yet. "Well, I don't think that's very fair," I called back, then almost slapping my tail over my mouth – that being something I had not at all meant to say out loud.

And I already knew that I had dug my own grave as the tom immediately let out another hiss, whipping himself back around and quickly stomping towards me. "And since when does a complete stranger get to tell the leader of BloodClan what is fair?" he practically barked in my face, his eyes two blue flames.

But I still tried my best to stay calm, not moving a single muscle, now knowing that this was indeed the leader of these strange cats. "Who says that the leader of BloodClan has to take the stranger's word for it?"

When the tom didn't immediately reply, I found myself going on and actually giving a contemptuous lash of my tail. "All I'm saying is that you and your *BloodClan cats* should show cats that happen to find their way here a bit more mercy."

I then found myself unsheathing my claws, sinking them into the rocky floor below as the black tom said nothing for a moment, his blue eyes simply staring into my soul and full of darkness. "If you need to be shown mercy, you don't deserve to be here."

Then, as I felt my stomach twist slightly, the tom turned around once again and began to pad away. "*Pass through* as you say you are, and stay out of my way."

As much as I was relieved that I had managed to talk myself out of any physical altercation, or best-case-scenario more bickering, I couldn't help but speak again. "And who's way am I staying out of?" I called out to the tom, my head tilting to the side.

Rather than fully turning around this time, he simply stopped in his tracks and looked back at me over his shoulder. "Scourge. Scourge, leader of BloodClan," he muttered through gritted teeth once again before continuing ahead. "Remember that the next time you decide to be so cocky."

I then couldn't help but let out a snort and wrinkle my nose. *Next time? Any amount of time leading up until next time will be too soon,* I thought bitterly as I watched the tom walk away for a moment, the setting sun in the sky making his black fur look even more sleek and shiny.

But once he was out of my sight fully, disappearing behind one of the many buildings ahead, I turned around and began to walk in the opposite direction, *so* incredibly shocked by how I had just handled that entire situation.

The fact that I had been able to appear so tough (as far as I knew), and on my own after being used to having my parents by my side, was surprising to say the least. *Well... I suppose that I had no choice...* I thought, closing my eyes as I fought another wave of grief for a moment. *There was no one for me to hide behind or rely on, so I had no choice but to defend myself.*

I then shook my head and let out a sigh, suddenly being filled with amazement. *And as well as I did just now, I still don't think I want to push things any more with this... Scourge. I've already seemed to push enough of his buttons, and I don't think he'll be as forgiving if there's ever a next time.*

I then found myself shaking my head once again, but this time, with the intent of keeping myself awake as I tried to navigate through the Twolegplace, which was now significantly quieter and emptier as everything grew darker. *For now, I think I need to find a place to sleep, and I'll plan to set out early tomorrow morning, and begin to find my way out of here,* I told myself. *I've had enough for today – this place is very odd, and exhausting.*

But I quickly realized that I didn't have the faintest idea of where to sleep. I hadn't seen many places that could be considered as "shelter" here, and surely many of the places that I *would* see suited would likely already be occupied.

And sure enough, as I continued to walk along one of the thin thunderpaths, I could actually hear the stirring of paws and smell the stenches of these city cats settling down for the night – seemingly sleeping under Twoleg rubble or in small crevices outside of Twoleg nests.

For a moment, I was actually at a loss, and knew that I couldn't and shouldn't be anywhere out in the open, or I'd likely wake up in the middle of the night being ripped to shreds.

But after a few moments of glancing around, I abruptly stopped in my tracks as I caught sight of something above me. *But that sure can't happen if no cat can reach me!*

I quickly realized that the tall Twoleg next to me actually seemed to be quite climbable – having several small objects that seemed to jut out from it that were very easy to get a grip on. *It's no tree...* I thought as I made the first leap up without any hesitation and easily climbing up onto the first platform. *But with all of the practice I've gotten climbing every single kind of rock, that should help me here...*

My teeth gritted in concentration, I then slowly began to work my way up the building, each level being harder than the last, but leading me closer and closer to my destination.

And soon enough, I found myself letting out one last huffy breath as I pulled myself to the top, immediately leaping up to my paws and giving myself a satisfied shake of my fur. I then took one large glance around what was in front of me, quickly relieved to see that there were no other signs of life up here.

The top of this nest was completely flat, and there weren't really any objects that I could take shelter under, *but surely not many cats could make the climb that I just did, right?* I tried to tell myself as I simply decided to turn around and settle in the spot I was standing in, taking a glance at the dark sky above. *And I haven't slept under the stars in a while...*

I then lowered my head just a bit to take in the rest of my view, my eyebrows raising with astonishment and awe at everything that I could see from up here.

I almost felt as if I could see the entire Twolegplace from where I lied, being able to see the countless twisty thunderpaths everywhere, and the buildings seemed to stretch endlessly, almost looking to be full of stars as light leaked through the insides of them.

The sounds of Twolegs and monsters still seemed to surround me, but I had to admit, this view was very nice. Weirdly, I actually felt that I had a moment of inner piece from where I lied, and being this

high up almost made me feel like that I had overcome all of the barriers that I had faced today. I had managed to navigate a strange place that I had never seen before, and I'd managed to talk myself out of some nasty confrontations with some nasty cats.

Then, as I lowered my head slightly, deciding to try and see what was directly below me, I found myself flicking my ears in surprise. *Speaking of nasty cats...*

I was shocked as my eyes seemed to fall on who I immediately recognized to be Scourge, slinking through the darkness as he also seemed to be searching for his own place to rest.

And almost as if he sensed that my gaze had fallen on him, he actually looked up, his blue eyes locking with my pale blue ones.

I froze, letting my claws unsheathe and sink into the ground once again as I anticipated him hissing me again or attempting to send me away.

But he didn't, his gaze dark and cold as he stared up at me.

And I found that I couldn't look away, simply staring back and hoping that my gaze was just as dark and cold. For whatever reason, I almost felt like I had something to prove to him, and that I had no choice but to appear just as tough as he made himself appear. And for whatever reason, I felt like I had to bring myself to his level to feel like I could even settle here.

And I continued to be shocked as that seemed to work once again, Scourge simply sighing as he then turned away and disappeared into the darkness once again.

Somehow, I had stumped him again. *Or, maybe he really does think that I'm just not worth his time, like he said, and trusts that I'm passing through?*

I then gave a shake of my head. *Either way, I'm already amazed that I'm having to go up to such a level with cats like him. Who would have ever thought that you'd have to become so confrontational just to be able to get cats to let you mind your own business?*

A chill then ran down my spine as I finally lowered my head over my paws. *And after today, I honestly would be shocked if the wild cats that Barley told me about are anything like this... BloodClan,* I then thought as I closed my eyes and began to let myself drift off into sleep. *I can't picture Barley ever being acquainted with these kinds of cats. Something about them seems much stranger than the forest wild cats, and much darker...*

Chapter 10

[image]

Without the shields of the leaves of trees above me, the rising sun was practically blinding as I wandered through the Twolegplace, once again following along the path of one of the thinner thunderpaths that only Twolegs seemed to tread on.

However, I was scarcely seeing any Twolegs at all. I had woken up just a bit earlier, just as the sun making its appearance, and I was surprised to quickly discover that with the early morning brought... *calm* in a place that had been *chaos* not too long ago. Monsters only passed on the bigger thunderpath every once in a while, and it was a rarity for me to see another living creature. Even the cats around here seem to prefer to sleep in a little bit...

Luckily, all of this would be to my advantage, and would make my traveling progress go must faster.

However, I was mighty hungry.

Just as I'd woken up at the top of that tall Twoleg nest, my rumbling belly reminded me that I had not eaten in a *long* time – two or three days at least – and finding some sort of food needed to take priority.

But I had absolutely no idea where to start. I unfortunately was pretty certain that is was not the kind of place that prey would be scampering around.

But at the same time, I really hoped that I wouldn't have to resort to eating out of one of those trunk-shaped compartments that those two snarky cats from yesterday were...

But nevertheless, I tried to keep an open mind and be patient as I continued to wander for a bit, looking around and also trying to catch any sort of scent that I thought smelled like food.

While it was taking me a bit of time, it certainly didn't feel like time was wasted. *I have to admit, in some weird way, this Twolegplace is actually scenic?* I thought to myself as I stared up at the tall buildings and clouds above. *It's scenic in a way that's very different from a forest or the plains... but again... that's exactly what I want.*

Just heartbeats later, I then found myself stopping in my tracks. *Wait a moment...*

I then closed my eyes, simply taking it in as a scent that actually smelled *somewhat* like food actually flooded through my nostrils. But at the same time, it had a very unfamiliar twang that had a hint of... *crowfood?* I realized to myself, immediately wanting to move on with that in mind.

But just a heartbeat later, my stomach let out the most belly-ripping, loud growl that it had all morning, and I knew that I couldn't wait much longer.

I looked up from where I'd been staring down at my stomach, letting out a sigh as I began to pad forward to follow the scent. *Goodness gracious...*

The smell seemed to be coming from another wide, dark area that was in-between two buildings. But this gap actually didn't lead to light or more Twolegplace on the other side, and rather seemed to lead to infinite darkness.

But nevertheless, I pushed forward, quickly noticing a large, dark green, square-shaped object just barely in the light that was filled to the *brim* with junk. It was practically overflowing, so much so that some of the things in it had fallen out of it. One of those things appeared to be the leftovers of a Twoleg's meal that they had thrown out.

And it smelled slightly of... prey?

Actually feeling a rush of excitement (and desperation) I quickly ran up to the food on the ground and gave it a good look. It looked like a piece of meat that had been made into a strange shape – almost like the shape of cat-tails, the plants that grew next to ponds and

streams – and it was partly wrapped in something smooth and beige.

It actually smelled really, *really* good, and I couldn't help but lick my lips. *But... has it really come to this?* I thought reluctantly, then wrinkling my nose as I bent down to take my first bite.

I then closed my eyes tightly as I then let my teeth sink into the juicy meat. *Hey, all I know is experiencing new things all of the time. This is nothing.*

Then, as I lifted my head and chewed and swallowed, I was satisfied as I didn't immediately want to vomit it back up. *Not bad!*

I then eagerly bent down to take a second bite, but quickly froze, my stomach twisting upside down and into a knot as I heard what sounded like a low growl come from just a few lengths ahead in the darkness.

And I then felt as if my soul had left my body as I then watched, absolutely terrified as a large black dog emerged from the shadows, its teeth barred and claws unsheathed as it creeped up towards me.

And my heart sank as I realized that this dog had probably already claimed my food as his own.

And I had absolutely no idea what to do, my mind spiraling, my legs shaking, and my fur was bristled out to double my size as the dog continued to approach me, clearly waiting for its moment to strike.

But despite that, I could not move. Simply put – the sight of a dog was giving me a feeling like I'd never experienced before, given the last time I had encountered a dog. Images that were too much to bear began to flash through my mind, and for a moment, I thought that all I could do was sink to the ground and wail.

Any amount of time after that experience was way, way too soon.

However, somehow, by the grace of a higher power, the reality of the situation sank in as the dog finally let out a deafening bark and leapt at me. Shoot!

Panicking, I actually managed to scratch it across the muzzle, blood immediately landing onto the ground as my claws managed to sink beneath its skin.

But to my dismay, this only made it angrier, causing it to make another leap at me. But this time, I decided to *flight* as opposed to *fight*, whipping myself around and hoping with everything that I could somewhat outrun it.

But I immediately felt a split heartbeat of unbearable pain as the dog managed to swipe at my tail with its gigantic claws. *Good grasshoppers on a pile of grass!*

However, the adrenaline almost helped me to completely ignore the pain as I finally decided to leap up the wall of one of the buildings and climb as high as I could. The dog immediately ran up to the wall, jumping up on its hind legs and snapping up at me, but it clearly didn't have a *sliver* of climbing skills, easily allowing me to climb high enough to then leap to the side and on top of the large green object filled with junk.

And while I was now safe, I was trapped and only cowered back as the dog then skittered over to the large object, making several attempts at leaping up to the top – honestly looking quite stupid as it failed every time...

But it barely humored me. *What the heck am I supposed to do?* I wondered fearfully as I stared wide-eyed down at the creature. *Wait until it finally tires itself out and collapses, hopefully giving me a chance to sneak away?*

I then took a pawstep back, startled as the dog then abruptly let out a yelp and fell to its side. *Well, that was fast!*

I then flicked my ears, managing to feel even more surprised as I quickly recognized the hisses of a cat that began to mix with the growls of the dog. *What in the name of...?*

My anticipation suddenly killing me, I couldn't help but peer over the edge of my safety place, and I was more than shocked to then see black fur mangled with even more black fur as the cat and the

dog wrestled.

And my shock continued to rise as I thought that I recognized that black-furred cat. *No way...*

And I could simply watch with my mouth practically to the ground as I watched Scourge very viciously fight this dog off – staying true to his mantra of showing no mercy as he seemed to give the mut countless scratches, ignoring its yowls as he took any means possible to win the fight. *Dang...*

And sure enough, the dog was scared away within heartbeats – whimpering and running away out into the emerging busy-ness of the Twolegplace as blood dripped from a nasty wound on its shoulder.

I then looked back down at Scourge to see him also watching the dog flee, proceeding to simply let out a huff and lick some of the blood off of his paws. "The dog's gone. You can come down now."

I stared down at the tom with narrowed eyes for a few moments before hesitantly doing so, making a swift leap and landing onto the hard ground below. "I could tell," I muttered contemptuously, my eyes immediately falling on Scourge's creepy collar and a chill running down my spine as I realized that he had probably done this many times before. "Thanks, I suppose."

I then narrowed my eyes once again as Scourge let out a snort. "I would say *my pleasure*, if it was, but I'd be lying," he nearly hissed, standing up and flashing me an annoyed look. "I can't believe I even had to do that."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Excuse me?"

Scourge then began to shake his head. "I don't think I've ever seen a cat as old as you that couldn't defend themselves."

I nearly let out a taken-aback gasp at that remark. "Hey!"

"You ran away and hid like a coward!" Scourge went on, seeming genuinely amazed that I hadn't fought back. "For your information, *no* cat that lives around here runs away."

I held back a hiss as I forced myself to take a step towards the tom, more than determined to defend myself. "Well, for your information, I *don't* live here," I began, my voice sharp. "For your information, I was caught completely off guard. And for your information..."

I then trailed off of my words, my heart suddenly sinking to the ground as a certain thought was finally able to process. "I was never taught how to fight," I nearly choked out. *The day that I was supposed to be taught never came...* "What else could I do?"

To my surprise, Scourge's blue eyes actually seemed to flash with curiosity for just a moment before washing over with darkness and pride once again. "Neither did I," he replied, licking a paw and running it over an ear, "but here I am."

I raised my eyebrows, actually growing incredibly intrigued with those words. "Really? No one taught you?"

Scourge let out another snort, giving a lash of his tail. "I didn't need anyone to teach me."

I only stared back, dumbfounded. "You're kidding."

"Nope," Scourge meowed, unsheathing his claws and licking more blood off of them, and my admiration began to falter just a bit as I noticed just how proud he was of his self-discovered toughness. "Any cat genuinely worth looking up to, admiring, or following doesn't need to be taught. They have it in them all along."

But despite that, I was still filled with a lot of admiration, weirdly. "Interesting," I muttered, then giving an eye roll as I finally broke my gaze away from the tom and beginning to walk back towards my abandoned food – remembering that this tom was really annoying. "Well then, according to your logic, I guess I'm not worthy, but you've made that clear to me already."

But I almost immediately paused again as a thought came to me, causing me to tilt my head to the side. "And yet, you saved me." I then slowly turned back around to face Scourge. "Why?"

Scourge nearly seemed to let out a purr of amusement, as if the question was completely outrageous. "I may not want you here, but I don't want those brutes here even more."

I simply nodded slowly. "Huh..."

"I've run into that dog a couple of times," Scourge went on, gesturing towards the Twolegplace ahead with his tail. "He's tough, but he's an idiot – it never takes long to scare him off."

For some reason, I felt tempted to press the tom. "Is that really all?"

I forced myself to not move a muscle as Scourge then let out a hiss, meeting my gaze with blue flames. "For a cat whose name I don't even know, you've already made my fur bristle more than I'd like."

"Mist," I answered simply as I stared smugly back at him.

Scourge then simply stared at me for a moment, his gaze curious once again. "Mist," he muttered before giving a shake of his head. "And why are you still here, Mist?"

I raised my eyebrows back at him. "You really think that passing through a place like this just takes a day?"

He then let out a hiss of frustration. "Whatever. You're taking too long."

I then felt my eyes narrow down into slits. "You're very territorial," I observed out loud.

"You're very interrogational," Scourge then nearly growled.

"And you aren't?"

"Shut up."

"Shut up!?" I then repeated, bewildered. "Why?"

"I just remembered that this isn't worth my time," Scourge muttered sharply, his eyes narrowed as he then brushed past me. "Seriously, get out of here before you become even more of a nuisance, if that's

possible."

I cringed back at the tom's fur brushing mine. "Whatever," I replied, imitating his own tone. And after he simply let out a hiss in reply, I let out a sigh, deciding that despite his arrogance and aggressive nature, he deserved genuine words of gratitude. "But thanks for saving me, really."

Scourge stopped in his tracks, sighing and looking over his shoulder for just a moment. "Sure," he muttered before making his way out into the streets of the Twolegplace.

And as I watched him go, settling down so that I could finally enjoy my meal, I couldn't believe it, but I couldn't help but think that that conversation was... fun? It honestly had never been so enjoyable to purposely ruffle another cat's fur. And for whatever reason, despite the tough act he puts on, he didn't kill me... which is good.

And as strange as Scourge's mindset was, I honestly couldn't help but admire the tom's nobility and courage, and no matter the motivation, he had saved me from the creature that I would forever hold a grudge against, and I'd be forever grateful for that.

Chapter 11

[image]

Honestly, I felt more relaxed than I had felt in a very long time as I padded through the busy Twolegplace that next morning, the sun already well-risen, and everything that could possibly stir, stirring.

Once again, I was trying my best to navigate between the countless amounts of Twolegs walking on the thinner thunderpath, but at this point, it just felt like second nature. And anyway, I had veered a little to one side of the path, closer to the buildings, and was out of the way.

And as I passed building by building, simply taking in the surroundings around me as I traveled, I actually was frequently able to spot the cats of *BloodClan*, I presumed. They either seemed to be traveling themselves, looking for food, or even talking or spitting insults at each other. *They all always look like their fur is ruffled... and I mean that literally and figuratively,* I thought, licking one of my paws and running it over one of my ears. *And they all give off such a... vicious aura.*

And clearly, they weren't welcoming, to say the least. However... I actually could admire the fact that they were so territorial, in a way. *I mean... once you're in... you're in, I guess? And you're welcomed.*

But with how little I still knew about these weird Twolegplace cats, I decided that I couldn't ponder it all very much. And anyway, I found that I suddenly couldn't think about anything else when I suddenly heard a very loud growl come from my stomach. *Darn it...* I thought, letting out a nearly inaudible hiss. *I forgot that I'm hungry again...*

While the meal that Scourge had basically won for me yesterday had definitely held me over for a little while, but I now found that I was just as starving as I had been before then. *But where the heck am I going to find food now?*

I honestly was a little reluctant to grab food from one of those large green objects again, let alone look in one of those dark gaps in between buildings. Clearly, nothing good lurked there, and I wasn't going to take any chances.

So, once again just like yesterday, I had absolutely idea where to start in finding a meal. I had subconsciously been looking around all morning already, with no luck at all.

That was, another somewhat unfamiliar, yet delicious scent began to flood through my nostrils. It actually smelled similar to what I had eaten yesterday, but smelled so much nicer and sweeter, and didn't have that twang of crowfood mixed in with it.

Now determined to follow this scent, I padded forward, the aroma luckily growing stronger with each pawstep that I took.

And almost immediately, it led me to a... quite strange sight.

Just a few fox-lengths in front of me was a Twoleg, standing just at the edge of the smaller thunderpath that I was walking on. The Twoleg, one that appeared to be a male, had what looked like a very, *very* small Twoleg nest in front of him – it was the only way I felt I would describe it to another cat.

It had a square part that had red and yellow stripes along it that went up to the Twoleg's flank, with four very thin silver trunks that stretched just a bit higher, that eventually all met with a roof that was also yellow and red.

As weird as it all was, I was certain that I'd found the right place – that amazing, warm smell fully emitting from it. And to add to that, I quickly caught sight of dozens of the small pieces of meat piled together at the top of the square part, just in front of the Twoleg and where his paws were, steam fluttering atop of them as if they were still fresh and hot.

Gee... I could practically feel my mouth watering, and my stomach growled once again, almost on cue.

I then felt my stomach sink a little bit as something hit me. How

could I possibly manage grabbing one with that Twoleg standing right there? If I simply padded up to it and leapt up to them, the Twoleg would surely retaliate somehow, whether that was by shielding the food or swatting me away. *Hm...*

Quickly, thank goodness, I decided that I would need to go with the element of surprise, making sure that the Twoleg would be so caught off guard that he wouldn't have time to react.

Still thinking fast, feeling absolutely starving at this point, I actually decided to start climbing up the building behind the Twoleg, which was luckily made of some sort of rough stone, and was easy to grip.

I began to climb slower and slower the higher up that I was, trying to figure out just where I'd have to be in order to leap down at the right place and not crash into the roof, the square with the food on it, or the Twoleg.

Instinctively, after a few heartbeats, I came to a stop, my claws sinking as best they could into the stone next to me. I then looked over my shoulder and narrowed my eyes – almost as if that was going to assist me in making my aim. As hungry as I was, I tried to take my time and be thorough in my preparation.

And eventually, I attempted to leap down without overthinking it, quickly becoming overwhelmed with satisfaction as I made the correct landing. Then, as fast as I could, I snatched one of the smooth pieces of meat into my jaws as tried to get out of sight.

And that I did, pelting away and veering around a corner, hoping with everything that the Twoleg wasn't going to chase me. I could hear its angry cries from behind me, which was hopefully the only way it would decide to react to my shenanigans.

Thank goodness, I could be almost sure that the coast was clear when I finally slowed down, backing into a small gap between two buildings that actually didn't stretch far, or go back into the darkness. Rather, it just ended in another red-colored stone wall that only stretched about a tail-length back.

Now settled, I eagerly dropped my catch, so excited and so proud of

the scheme I had just pulled. *Time to feast!* I thought excitedly as I bent down to take my first bite.

"What do you think you're doing, Mist?"

I paused, my jaws still open as I gave the largest roll of my eyes. *You have got to be kidding me*, I thought, immediately recognizing the voice that I heard.

And sure enough, when I closed my jaws and looked up, I immediately saw the black pelt and piercing blue eyes of Scourge approaching me quickly, looking hostile and confrontational as usual. *And I hate that it's gotten to the point where I can say "as usual",* I thought bitterly. *He may have saved me from a dog, and he may be really fun to tease, but there is still so much of me that for some reason assumes I'm never going to see him again when he leaves, and when I do see him, it feels like each time is too soon.*

However, I tried to cling onto the fact that he wasn't the most unpleasant presence as I let out an annoyed huff and gestured to the food at my paws. "I may be passing through, but I most certainly can't do it on an empty stomach."

"Sure," Scourge nearly hissed, taking a glance down at the food, and then back at me. "But what makes you think that that food is yours?"

For a moment, I could only shake my head slowly with my mouth open, but no words coming out as I grew immensely confused by that question. "...I caught it?"

"In *my* territory!"

I then raised my eyebrows in complete shock, suddenly feeling like I'd been slashed across the face. "Excuse me?" I exclaimed. *My gosh, I don't know how many times I've already said that to him.*

Despite my bewildered response, Scourge continued, scolding me as if this was something I very well should have been aware of. "Any food caught on these grounds comes to me first."

"But I don't live here!" I quickly retorted. "I shouldn't have to follow

your rules."

Scourge gave a sharp lash of his tail, his eyes still blazing. "Doesn't matter."

"I'm just passing through. How many times do I have to say that?"

"Doesn't matter!"

I then found myself having to suppress a frustrated hiss. *Goodness, I've spent so much time trying to ruffle* his *fur that I forget how much he already ruffles mine.* "Oh my goodness, why?" I asked frustratedly.

Scourge then puffed out his chest, trying to appear larger, surely. "As leader of BloodClan, it is my obligation to make sure that my Clan is fed."

I then narrowed my eyes inquisitively back at the tom. "And me stealing a single piece of meat from a Twoleg jeopardizes that?"

"It's the beginning of that happening!" Scourge then insisted through a hiss.

None of Scourge's words were even remotely convincing, and I actually found myself taking a few pawsteps forward so that I could shield my catch with my front paws. "Well, I don't have some noble leader like you to feed me," I replied sharply, hoping that my gaze looked at least somewhat intimidating. "I think you can spare this one piece, genuinely."

Scourge finally seemed to realize that this argument was going to be a bit more difficult for him to win, letting out an annoyed huff, sitting down, and wrapping his tail neatly around his paws. "I wouldn't fight you on that if I hadn't already witnessed one too many fights between cats over food," he muttered bitterly, looking off to the side.

I simply continued to narrow my eyes back at him. "Wow, you are truly at your lowest of the low."

With those words, Scourge then shot a sharp gaze back at me, lashing his tail in my direction. "I *will* be if outsiders keep taking

our food!"

"Well, then I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do then," I sighed irritably, giving Scourge a shrug. I was still amazed that a cat was capable of being this stubborn and selfish. "To be honest, I could care a bit more about your obligation to feed your Clan if my stomach wasn't growling so badly it was making me go deaf."

Scourge only rolled his eyes at that before I continued, trying to speak more and more calmly – trying a new tactic, I suppose. "If you want me to get out of here so badly, I need to have the strength to do so."

"Geez..."

"And I need to take *care* of myself, for goodness sake!"

I then flicked my ears, surprised once again when Scourge scoffed in response to those words. "Well, I know you aren't doing a good job of that!"

I then raised my eyebrows, for some reason feeling very taken aback. "What do you mean?" I pressed.

Scourge then let out a snort, his gaze now contemptuous as he looked back at me. "I hope you recall that I saved you from a dog yesterday."

I then found myself taking another step towards Scourge, my frustration rising all over again. "And I hope you recall that I can't fight!"

Scourge then began to shake his head slowly, not being phased by my anger. "Yeah, about that," he then murmured, giving a lick on his own shoulder. "Why not? You seriously weren't taught?"

"No," I replied, trying to ignore the grief that was slowly beginning to weigh down my chest. "And I don't have the so-called intuitive skills that make me *worthy* to be able to know how to fight, either."

To my surprise, Scourge simply stared back at me as I spoke, only giving a "hm" in reply.

And for whatever reason, that made me feel like I had to press on – a weird feeling of shame making me feel like I suddenly had to explain myself. "And, well... if that wasn't bad enough, I especially don't respond well to dogs."

I then felt my eyes widen, almost immediately regretting my own words as I took a glance at Scourge's collar. The fact that he appeared to have conquered so many probably made my words sound even more pitiful.

But the black tom continued to surprise me when he didn't immediately scoff again. Rather, he continued to stare, his blue eyes dark and narrowed.

"Well, who does?" he muttered, giving another lash of his tail. "But why you, specifically?"

I then found myself giving a small shudder, the grief I had been trying to fight violently taking over as I answered Scourge – the answer being something that felt horrible speaking aloud, as I hadn't had to do that yet. "My parents died fighting them," I forced out, those words feeling like a physical wound to speak. "It happened not too long ago, just about a moon or two."

"Hm," Scourge replied simply again.

And at this point, whether or not the BloodClan leader was actually listening, I found myself going on – these words being painful to say aloud, but equally as relieving. All of this has been pent up inside of me for that moon or two, only being able to come out in my waves of grief I tried to fight on my own. "So, not only have I seen how tough dogs are, considering they managed to get two of the bravest, strongest cats that I know, but just the sight of one reminds me of... *all* of it..."

I then screwed my eyes shut for a moment, the sadness becoming unbearable. However, I only tried to process it for a few heartbeats before ruthlessly pushing it away and continuing to speak. "So, forgive me for running," I eventually murmured, flashing Scourge a bitter, but teasing look. "I know that's not how you do things."

Not to my surprise at all, Scourge didn't reply with any condolences or sympathy. "Not particularly," he muttered. However, I then raised my eyebrows, yet again surprised as he then took a step closer to me. "They took both of your parents?"

After I simply gave a slow nod, he sat down again and then asked, "Where did you live with them?"

I thought for a moment, eventually deciding to give the tom the same answer I'd given his presumed Clanmates just days before. "Well... nowhere, and everywhere at the same time," I shared to Scourge. "We just wandered as we pleased, settling down whenever we felt like it."

I then gave a shrug, gesturing with my tail towards the busy Twolegplace behind us. "It's all I know how to do, and it's also all I've done since I lost them."

I then found myself blinking in shock, processing everything I'd been doing up until this point, one of them including beginning to tell about my life to a cat that pretty much had shown me nothing but bitterness every time we met. *But at the same time... I haven't had a conversation this long with any cat since... since...* I then trailed off of my own thoughts for a moment. *I don't care who it is – getting to put these thoughts out feels so nice, no matter how unsympathetic the responses I receive are.*

However, I still awaited Scourge's response as I watched him process my words. "Hm," he simply grunted once again, his eyes still narrowed. "And you've just been alone since then?"

"Trying to fend for myself the best that I can," I answered the tom with a shrug.

I then took a step back, once again gesturing to my catch on the ground. "Hence, why I am trying to *feed* myself, thank you very much!"

I immediately braced myself for a sharp retort in return, but instead, I actually found myself shifting uncomfortable as Scourge simply stared at me for what felt like *too* much time, being weirdly

silent.

Not being able to stand it, I tried to break the deafening quiet after a few heartbeats. "What?"

After a few more unbearable heartbeats of silence, I flicked my ears when Scourge finally let out a sigh, standing up. "Keep it," he muttered almost inaudibly.

I had no idea what the tom meant for a moment. "Keep what?"

"Your catch. Keep it."

I slowly raised my eyebrows in complete shock. "Really?"

"Yes," Scourge replied quickly, suddenly acting a bit more authoritative – almost if he were in a hurry and needed to get things done. "Under one condition."

It was now me that took a moment to speak, feeling my stomach twist up into a knot with nerves. "...What?" I pressed reluctantly.

"That you bring it to our main camp."

My eyes then completely widened with those words, and for a moment, all I could do was stand frozen as I watched Scourge turn around and begin to walk away. "Come with me."

I then gave a quick shake of my head to bring myself back into focus, but still having a hard time processing what was going on. "Come with you?" I repeated loudly. "Why?"

Scourge stopped in his tracks for a moment, looking sharply back at me. "If you want to eat, you'll come with me," he hissed through gritted teeth just before continuing in his travel – I guess just assuming that I'd follow him now without any argument.

And despite how flabbergasted I was, I couldn't believe it, but I actually found myself doing that.

I wasn't sure if it was simply out of curiosity, intrigue, or maybe I was just so desperate for food that I'd do anything to get it. *But*

either way... I began to tell myself as I followed Scourge through the Twolegplace. *Surely based on what I've just told him, Scourge probably realizes, like me, that I have nothing to lose at this point.*

Chapter 12

[image]

For the entirety of our travel, Scourge and I walked in complete silence, me only being able to rely on Scourge's familiarity of the area as he led me through the Twolegplace.

The silence was both because of my intense anticipation, but also because... what could I even say? At this point, Scourge and I had done nothing but bitterly banter with each other. I thoroughly enjoyed it, but I also could be certain that picking another fight wouldn't be wise, and surely he wouldn't be interested in casual conversation.

So, I said nothing. But to be honest, I was also just extremely weirded out to be traveling with another cat in some capacity, no matter who it was. While I had begun to make good associations with traveling on my own, after moons of feeling nothing but grief with being by myself, this was actually somewhat refreshing – just knowing that some other presence was there on your journey.

And I found that I was actually beginning to enjoy this small adventure with Scourge, when suddenly I was overwhelmed with the scents of several, *several* cats. All mingled together, they almost smelled how Scourge smelled but multiplied... and a bit... worse?

And I actually found myself having to suppress a gag by the time that Scourge and I arrived to a worn-down wooden fence – something that I somewhat recognized from smaller Twolegplaces that I have traveled in before.

Almost as soon as we had come to a stop, Scourge actually gave a lash of his tail, then looking over his shoulder as if he were checking to see if I was still there, his blue eyes dark and narrowed.

The eye contact quickly felt too long and uncomfortable, and I found myself taking a step back. "...What?" I muttered as I blinked.

After another moment, Scourge's eyes narrowing even more, he let out a sigh and then faced the fence again. "Brace yourself," he murmured, before beginning to slide through a small gap in between two of the fence boards.

I blinked once again in surprise, having to take a few heartbeats to process what sounded like a threat. *And I have no idea how to take it...* I thought, letting out a sigh myself before finally forcing my paws forward and through the fence behind Scourge.

I could practically hear my heart beating in my ears at this point. From nerves? Of course! But had to admit, I was just a bit excited to see this "camp" that this BloodClan – this tough, vicious group of cats – supposedly settled in. Up until this point, I could only imagine what lay beyond this fence.

And despite that, I still felt my mouth drop, shocked as I saw what was in front of me. *Not necessarily a bad sort-of shocked, however...?*

As I *had* anticipated, and *smelled*, there were many, many cats in front of me, all settled in this fairly small camp that just lied in between two buildings that met together, creating a very large, roofless den for everyone. I recognized several of the large green squares up against the walls of the buildings, and large wooden boxes stacked up that several cats were lying on. Scraps of food, crowfood, and Twoleg rubbish were scattered everywhere.

The cats in this camp were either eating off of these scraps, digging in the large green objects to likely look for some more, lying in the sun, and several where even mock-fighting each other.

And least, I hoped it was only mock-fighting.

All of these BloodClan cats had been occupied with these things as I emerged through the fence, but as soon as I came into sight, everything seemed to freeze, and all eyes seemed to be on me.

I couldn't help but completely freeze, a chill running down my spine, but simultaneously feeling hot with all of the gazes burning into my soul.

I honestly didn't think that I had ever, ever been around this many cats at once. That was one thing, but I also hadn't been *looked at* by this many cats at once.

It was truly horrible, and I found I wanted to be alone all over again.

I then managed to tense up even more as I then felt Scourge's warm breath right on my ear. "Calm down," he hissed to me quietly through his teeth. "They'll be able to smell your fear."

I tried my best to let my fur lie flat, but it really wasn't working. "They're going to be able to see it too..."

As Scourge then simply scoffed, continuing to walk forward and gesturing with his tail for me to follow, I could hardly believe that I was now taking comfort in the black tom, following closely behind him as he led me deeper into BloodClan's camp. It seemed that he was actually trying to bring me in casually without any cats batting an eye.

But this quickly doesn't happen. Based on what I had experienced in this place so far, I shouldn't have only expected that.

And my belly was beginning to feel hollow with intimidation and fear as a very large black and white tom with several scars along his body, and two green flames for eyes quickly approached Scourge and me.

I then found myself taking a step back as he looked at me up and down a couple of times. "Hm, found a big piece of prey on your walk, Scourge?" he meowed, his voice deep and hoarse. He then gave a smug shrug and faced his leader with mischievous eyes. "I have to ask, because if this is a *cat* that you've brought here, she can turn around and go back to the kitty palace that she came from."

Oh, nuh-uh.

In that moment, almost all of my fear seemed to leave me and was replaced by humiliation and anger, but before I could even retort, I was surprised as Scourge actually let out a frustrated hiss, stepping

closer to the larger tom and actually somewhat shielding me. "Shut up, Bone," he nearly growled. "She's just some loner from the forest that I've run into one too many times in the past couple of days."

He then lashed his tail to the Twoleg food that I still held in my mouth from this morning. "She stole food from a human not too far from here, and I made her bring it here."

I then flicked my ears, watching for a moment and then continuing to follow as Scourge then began to pad forward again. But unfortunately for him, and me, many cats around were now beginning to stir, one of them actually letting out a contemptuous snort and running up to meet Scourge and this... *Bone*.

"So, any cat that happens to wander through here and manages to snatch some food gets a pass?" this tom – a ginger tabby with a patch of fur missing on his back – retorted.

"Geez, Brick, it's more than that you, idiot!" Scourge growled, coming to a stop once again. "She's had too much of a mind of her own around here despite saying that she's only *passing through* – causing trouble and taking food that she's not supposed to."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at these words.

"I'm trying to set her straight," Scourge then went on, actually flashing me the briefest unreadable glance. "If she catches anything in my territory while she's here, she brings it here."

Brick let out a huff at his leader's words, but before he could argue anymore, I felt my stomach twist up with nerves as I noticed another cat stand up and approach – a long-furred tabby she-cat with only one eye. *Goodness gracious...* I thought anxiously, trying with all of my might not to take another step back. *These cats really are scary, scarier and scariest, huh?*

This third cat also looked at me up and down once she was standing in front of Scourge and me. "Hm, are you sure about that, Scourge?" the she-cat meowed slyly in response to the tom's words. "She's quite the pretty cat. Do you think-"

I was bewildered by how quickly Scourge cut her off, letting out an almost outraged hiss. "And when in my life have I ever cared about something like that, Fury?" he barked back at her. "Geez."

I then was surprised when Scourge actually looked over his shoulder back at me for a moment, his gaze completely unreadable and dark all over again, before looking back at Fury. "I just figured that I could put her to good use here, rather than letting her continue to wander aimlessly around *my* territory and take our things."

I flicked my ears once again, Scourge continuing to shock me. He hasn't said anything like that to me yet. Is that actually true? Either way, I had no idea if I was supposed to be flattered.

But... I was?

"And speaking of putting cats to use..." Scourge then went on, cutting off my thoughts as he glared at Bone, Brick and Fury. "What are you all doing over here questioning my actions that you have no say in in the first place? Put *yourselves* to good use and go find some more food."

I then tensed up once again as Scourge lashed his tail towards me. "Mist has prey to offer and she's just arrived!"

I then looked nervously back at Brick as he let out another snort. "Her name is *Mist*?" he practically purred as he began to walk away, leading Bone and Fury towards the old wooden fence. "It just keeps getting better."

Scourge only let out another hiss in reply. "Shut up and stop wasting daylight," he commanded coldly to them, turning away and ignoring the dirty looks that his Clanmates gave to him as they all paused for a moment, all three of them seeming to hold back hisses as their fur bristled.

Scourge then paused for a moment, looking over his shoulder and giving the three cats another glare. "Out! Now."

I then could only watch as the three finally all left through the

small gap in the fence, barely being able to hear their bitter mutters as they all slowly left earshot. I then looked back at Scourge, whose gaze had been following my own.

And as weird as it was, I felt myself feeling the smallest twinge of admiration for the tom all over again. He was tough as nails, but I couldn't help but appreciate just how easily he had been able to talk down these three cats who had initially appeared so tough themselves. Him being able to take over as leader and run the Twolegplace as he liked it certainly hadn't been all talk...

But even more than all of that, I was still completely filled with shock at the fact that Scourge had admitted to other cats that he had brought me here to potentially... stay? *He'd mentioned it to them before he'd even mentioned it to me!*

Weirdly, that thought didn't really scare or daunt me, and I found that I wanted more details. The logistics, I suppose.

And luckily, no other cats seemed to want to criticize my presence anymore, but I felt several eyes still on me as I padded up to meet Scourge. "So, you think that I can be put to good use here? Interesting."

I then tilted my head to the side, further letting this thought sink in. "*Very* interesting, considering you know very well now that I can't even fight."

Scourge quickly let out a sigh as he turned to face me. "You heard me earlier," he muttered bitterly. "I'd rather have you here than messing around the Twolegplace causing trouble."

I actually let out a bewildered snort as I tilted my head to the side. "And I've really been causing that much trouble?"

I then forced myself to stand my ground as Scourge took a step closer to me, showing his teeth as he growled his next words. "In the span of just about two days, you've invaded this territory, riled up a dog that I had to save you from, and you've taken food as if you have free reign of the place!"

I then furrowed my eyebrows as Scourge then rolled his eyes, sitting down and wrapping his tail around his paws. "And every time I confront you about something, you act as if you've done nothing wrong?"

I further tilted my head to the side, now cocking a single eyebrow. "And you can't handle that? As leader of BloodClan, I'd think that you could take an outsider talking back to you."

I then gestured my tail towards the fence where three very annoyed BloodClan cats had just exited through. "You sure didn't have a problem getting them to do what you wanted."

"That's because they listen to me when I assert authority," Scourge then muttered, his eyes narrowing. He clearly was trying to keep his temper.

But as usual, that didn't scare me, and I actually gave the tom a mocking nod. "Ah, so you're just used to every cat bowing down to you," I teasingly observed out loud.

Scourge's eyes managed to narrow even more, making his gaze a dark blue. "No. I'm just used to cats knowing better than to *question* my authority."

"Well, there haven't really been any consequences for that for me, huh?" I replied back smartly. And when Scourge didn't reply to that, I couldn't help but push on. "I once again ask, you can't handle that?"

"I can handle it, Mist," Scourge then retorted quickly, standing up and sinking his large claws into the ground. "It is just *extremely* annoying and unnecessary."

I found I could only let out a satisfied grunt as I gave the tom a slow nod, my gaze burning into his. "I see..."

And after a few moments of Scourge simply staring back, I was surprised when he sat down again, his gaze actually softening somewhat. "And... sure," he whispered almost inaudibly. "I don't see it often."

I only stared back at the tom for a moment, still feeling incredibly satisfied that I managed to get under the tough leader's skin, but also intrigued as to why I was able to do it *so* easily and not get ripped apart. "Fair enough," I muttered quietly before continuing to probe. "But how does any of that explain why I'm here? I seriously can't wander around by myself or hunt my own food?"

"No," Scourge almost immediately replied, almost seeming relieved to somewhat be changing the subject as his blue eyes glowed with assertiveness and determination once again. "Everything that happens around here goes through me – passing through or not."

"Oh, please," I sighed, letting myself finally sit down. "I seriously doubt that any of your cats could even obtain the prey that I got in the way that I did."

I then widened my eyes, shocked by just how arrogant that had sounded. *Goodness gracious, Mist. You aren't the only cat on earth that can climb. And even if you were, there's no need to brag about it like that.*

So, I then shyly looked down at my paws for a moment. "Well, I assume, at least," I then muttered.

Scourge then let out a sniff, sitting down as well. "Well, sure," he surprisingly agreed. "They can't climb. They aren't squirrels."

I rolled my eyes, snorting at the tom's snide response. "Whatever," I groaned dismissively.

I then nearly let out a gasp, flicking my ears as I then quickly realized something. "Wait a moment..." I then murmured, slowly returning my gaze back to Scourge with narrowed eyes. "How did you know that I had to climb to get that food?"

I then stood up once again, taking a pawstep back. "Ew, were you *watching* me?"

Scourge immediately rolled his eyes, letting out a hoarse, annoyed sigh. "Please! Watching you? Come on. I happened to be passing by," he nonchalantly answered. "You were so busy trying to reach

the sky that you didn't notice me."

For a moment, I could only continue to stare, completely bewildered back at the black tom as this realization kept sinking in. "You were watching me." *Why would he take the time to watch me? And then wait to get after me after I'd gotten the catch? He is such a strange one...*

Scourge then furrowed his eyebrows, tilting his head back at me. "Are you just as dense as you are annoying?"

I then couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Oh, come on..." I then looked away for a moment, suddenly having so many questions for the BloodClan leader that I didn't even know where to start... or if I'd even remember them all.

I eventually decided to just stick with the original root of this conversation, *before* I'd come to the realization that Scourge had watched me snag that Twoleg food. "Well, I am curious though..." I mused after a few more heartbeats. "*Can* many BloodClan cats climb like that?"

To my surprise, Scourge actually didn't seem to need much time to ponder that question, giving a shrug and briefly glancing over his shoulder at the many cats behind him. "No. No, they can't."

He then let out an annoyed huff, looking to his side and very intentionally not making eye contact with me. "I... watching you..." he then began, for once not seeming to know exactly what he wanted to say as soon as soon as he spoke. "I was impressed, as much as it sickens me to say it."

Speaking of sickening, at those words, I almost completely shocked myself when I felt the smallest bit of affection well up inside of me. "Ahh, I see," I then meowed as I slowly nodded my head. *Wow, not only have I managed to receive a compliment from him, but he has now admitted to me that he did me bring me here because he sees some sort of potential in me... curioser.*

I then couldn't help but let out a sniff as something else crossed my mind. "You want to know something?" I then murmured to Scourge,

my eyes now narrowed into two mischievous slits.

"Not really."

"I don't think you're *that* annoyed when I talk back to you."

I then had to hold back a purr when Scourge let out a hiss, standing up once again and flashing me an indignant look. "And you further become annoying by making that statement!"

"Okay, then," I then meowed casually, giving a shrug and tilting my head again with still narrowed eyes. "And yet, you brought me here, said you were *impressed* by me, and said I could be of use."

For a few moments, Scourge didn't reply, staring off to the side as he seemed to ponder my words. "I did, didn't I?" he eventually muttered through gritted teeth.

I then, for some reason, felt another shiver run down my spine as he then met my gaze again, his expression slightly less cold. "Well?"

I actually had to give a quick shake of my head to bring myself back to focus. "Well, what?"

"Do you plan on accepting my offer?"

I raised my eyebrows back at him, for the first time processing the fact that he actually hadn't been pulling my tail this entire time.

Well, for all that I knew, he still could be. However... "So, this is actually an offer?" I couldn't help but ask Scourge.

The black tom then let out a groan, rolling his eyes for the hundredth time today. "Why does talking to you have to be so complicated?"

I flashed the tom a slightly apologetic, but simultaneously amused look. "Sorry," I then muttered before looking down at my paws, genuinely having to take the time to think on this.

As any cat would be, I was completely overwhelmed by this prospect. But at the same time... I was honored that Scourge has

actually seemed to observe the skills that I *did* have, and that he felt that he could make use of them.

And I especially found it interesting that after me reiterating to the tom *several* times that I was only passing through the Twolegplace, he still had seemed fairly adamant on bringing me here, despite how much of a nuisance I had apparently been to him thus far. I mean, I was still shocking myself with how confident and quick I had been able to be with these cats.

I wasn't completely sure, but... something about this place had seemed to bring out a new side of me. Sure, I'd always been determined and just a bit stubborn, but I suppose I had never been given a reason to talk to my parents in the way I'd had to speak to many of the cats here. I'd never been tested in this way. But I suppose that something about my past – maybe the confidence that my parents always had in facing newcomers, or sometimes with each other - had given me somewhat of a backbone.

The kind of backbone I needed to be able to handle a place like this.

But was it necessary to stay here and *handle* it? All I had ever known was traveling, never settling down and never having a destination.

But with that kind of life, it also meant that... I never truly had an obligation towards a certain place up until this point.

Where did I truly have to go after this? What would I be missing out on if I stayed?

And along with that... traveling had only made me think of... my past. A past that I had traveled through here to try and escape briefly.

And as I had hoped, this place had certainly helped me to accomplish that. This place and this life was weird and new, but... it was *weird* and *new*. It didn't remind me of *anything*. And clearly, I fit in to some capacity. And the fact that the leader of this place has noticed me made it all the more intriguing.

Barley's warning to me all of those moons ago about this place seemed to hold true, but... was it anything that I couldn't handle?

After a long, deep breath, I finally broke my gaze from my paws and met Scourge's dark, but curious gaze. "I'm in," I tried to meow clearly and confidently. "Thank you."

I then couldn't help but sniff, looking down at the food that I had brought, which I had set down some time ago now. "So, does that mean that I finally get to eat what I caught?"

I then nearly dropped my jaws in shock when Scourge quickly shook his head. "Mm, you're not in that easily."

"Are you kidding me?" I exclaimed, my eyes widening. *After all of that?*

I could only watch, bewildered as Scourge padded up closer to me, his gaze now sharp and full of determination. "You may clearly show skill in hunting and... badmouthing, but you're right, it's like you said – you can't fight." I then flicked my ears as he narrowed his eyes once again. "And if you continue to show that you can't fight, then we have a problem here. You need to prove to me that I'm not working with nothing if I actually take the time to teach you."

At this point, I found that I could only listen, full of dread and intrigue at the same time.

For some reason, my gut told me that I might know where Scourge was going with this.

"While you've never fought before, it's like I've said – every cat worthy of being here has it innate within them somewhere. Show me at least that you have that."

I simply stared wide-eyed back at the tom. "By... doing what?"

Scourge only stared intently and darkly back at me as he then answered, "We're going back to that alley that you found your first meal in, and you're going to fight off that same dog. By yourself."

Chapter 13

[image]

I never thought that I'd have to return to this alley again, and I had been perfectly fine with that.

But there I was, standing right in the center of it and feeling more nervous that I had felt in days.

And I practically felt as if I couldn't move as I watched Scourge leap up to the same green square box that I had taken shelter on top of just a couple of days earlier. He grabbed some Twoleg rubbish food from the piled-up mess, jumped back down, and then set it down just a few tail-lengths in front of me.

I then tried as hard as I could to keep my composure as Scourge then walked up to meet me. "Alright," he breathed, his gaze dark as he stared deep into my eyes. "You're ready."

"Am I?" I couldn't help but reply as I tried to keep my fur flat.

Scourge then slowly narrowed his eyes down into slits, and he was silent for a few moments. "You still want to be a part of BloodClan, don't you?" he eventually muttered.

A shiver ran down my spine. *Well, that tone makes me question it, however...* I thought to myself, taking a deep breath and straightening my posture. *It's time for something new. Something different, and I don't even fully care what it is or why this feels right.* "I can't believe that I do," I then replied with a shrug.

"Well then, yes. You are ready," Scourge answered coldly, giving a single sharp nod. Sharp tingles then seemed to run down my fur as Scourge's brushed mine, and he put his muzzle close to my ear. "You have no choice at this point," he then whispered before walking back to join the other BloodClan cats had actually come to *watch* my task.

Hoot, Jumper, and Scraps, who all looked ridiculously smug, but simultaneously a bit nervous as they stared ahead at the stray food that Scourge had set out, and they all listened intently as Scourge spoke again. "The dumb brute typically stops by around this time to look for food," he meowed more loudly as he followed the toms' gazes.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at that comment. *Hm. I already figured that out by accident.*

Scourge then sat down next to his Clanmates, flashing me a brief, unreadable glance. "We just have to wait for him to arrive, and then it's all you, Mist."

Exciting... I thought, having to take a moment to catch my breath as my current reality hit me like a monster all over again. *Oh my moles on a mountain of mountain lions and maggots, how the heck am I going to do this?*

I then shifted my gaze from where I had been looking at Scourge to the three strange spectators who had joined us. "And they're here because...?"

Scraps, a patchy black, white, and tortoiseshell, let out a snort and narrowed his gleaming amber eyes. "You'll find that we're always up to watch a good fight when the opportunity comes," he meowed slyly. "That is... if you even live to find out..."

I then rolled my eyes once again as Hoot and Jumper laughed at that comment. To my surprise, Scourge actually looked over at the other three, flashing them a dark, warning look through narrowed eyes.

However, not as surprisingly, he didn't deny what Scraps had said. For some reason, this somewhat amused me. But only a little. I was mainly feeling uneasy about Scraps' teasing threat,

But Scraps would never know that, of course.

So, instead, I couldn't help but meow teasingly, "Hm, even if a dog attempts to shred me to bits, Scourge won't be able to help

swooping in and helping." I then flashed the black tom a smug look.

Scraps' eyes immediately widened at my words, and his jaws practically dropped to the ground. "Whoa, what?"

Next to him, Hoot looked just as amused and bewildered as he stared over at Scourge. "Ah, so you really *did* save her from that dog once already?"

"Forget that!" Jumper then... *jumped* in. "You *saved* someone? That's unheard of! You've done nothing of the sort since you first scared away that dog before you even joined BloodClan!"

I raised my eyebrows with intrigue at what Jumper said. Scourge also fought a dog in order to make it into BloodClan? Is that the rite of passage here?

I didn't get long to contemplate that, with Scourge actually letting out an infuriated hiss. "Shut up," he barked to his Clanmates through gritted teeth, actually looking way more than just mildly annoyed like he usually was. He then turned his head to flash me a shocked and angry look, acting as if I had said something that I shouldn't have.

And, I mean, sure, with how Hoot, Jumper, and Scraps were reacting, I supposed I would have been angry too. But *this* angry? *I was just teasing. What's the big deal?*

"No *way!*" Scraps then went on again. "There's already been speculation, but now we know for sure that Scourge – our leader – is a big-'ol softie! Bringing a cat like her here is one thing, but you *saved* her from this dog?"

Hoot was now shaking his head in disbelief. "Holy heck, who would've thought that Scourge would let a pretty cat get to his head so much?"

Scourge finally seemed to reach his breaking point, the growl that had been rising in his throat finally breaking as he whipped himself around to face his Clanmates, his fur bristled out fully. "*Shut up!* All of you," he roared as he then began to slowly approach them,

causing them to slowly back away. "First of all, as I've already reiterated *several* times today, what I do around here and why I do it is none of your business."

The BloodClan leader then briefly flashed me another completely ambiguous look before returning to staring down the three toms. "And second of all, for all you all know, maybe I just didn't want a rotting corpse lying around in my territory. However..."

I then felt my eyes slowly widen as Scourge unsheathed his large, sharp claws. "...I'm never *completely* opposed to the idea..."

Whoa.

I was appalled by this very harsh and threatening tone, to say the *least*, but I also felt as if I was having to push down my intrigue and admiration as I simply watched the confrontation go on.

Scourge, who seemed to get his point across, was just beginning to turn back around when Jumper suddenly muttered, "*Maybe*."

Scourge stopped in his tracks as abruptly as if he'd just become frozen in ice. "What was that?" he murmured ominously as he then slowly turned his head back to look at Jumper.

Jumper then looked down at his paws as he began to shuffle them back and forth. "Um..."

"*Yes?"* Scourge then hissed, fully turning to face the dumbfounded black and white tom.

I actually felt another twinge of admiration at just seeing Jumper push on despite his leader looking like he wanted to brutally murder him. "Well, you said... *maybe*," he then meowed very matter-of-factly. "*Maybe* – when you were talking about not wanting the rotting..."

He then gave a shake of his head, almost as if to center himself again. "Like... that that maybe wasn't the reason that you saved..."

Jumper then trailed off, which I honestly thought was smart of him, as Scourge now looked like he was going to explode – his fur

bristled, his teeth barred, with his claws somehow digging into the concrete ground. "You seriously think that this is funny?" he roared once again, stepping forward to get right into Jumper's face. "You seriously-"

Almost abruptly, Scourge's words then became blurry as I heard heavy pawsteps in front of me.

And I finally was able to acknowledge the new, horrible scent that I'd been too distracted to notice for a while.

I dreaded having to turn my head around.

But as Scourge's words "*you have no choice*" echoed in my mind, I forced myself to do just that, my stomach dropping as I saw exactly what I had dreaded to see.

The same dumb black dog from what just felt like moments ago was steadily creeping up to the food that Scourge had set – not noticing me or the others at all, even despite their bickering behind me.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to vomit or pass out.

I had to admit, I even had a moment where I was so scared, and so sure that I couldn't do it or even try, that I considered just letting the dog eat the food and then walk away like it was nothing. But I knew that even with the bickering that was still going on behind me, I could never get away with that.

And along with that, there also just wasn't much time to waste – to avoid a stupid tug-of-war or immediate death with or from the dog, I knew that I had to grab the bait before the dog got too deep into his meal. I really do have no choice now...

For just a couple of heartbeats, I then looked behind me back at the four BloodClan cats, absolutely shocked to see the four of them still at each other's throats, and Scourge still scolding them

For some reason, this sight actually gave me another moment of amusement. *Despite all of those tom's really, really brutal threats, wouldn't he kill them if he really wanted to?* I couldn't help but wonder. *I mean, I'm sure that he does want to rip into them to some*

extent, but at the same time, it's clear that he gets some satisfaction with having cats that blindly follow him.

I then flicked my ears as something else crossed my mind. *Is that what I'm doing by trying to prove myself and join this Clan?*

I then let out an almost inaudible hiss as I gave a quick shake of my head. *I'm not following anybody.* I told myself. *I'm here to find that new life.*

I then finally turned around to face the dog, who was opening his jaws and bending down to take the first bite of its treat. *And it begins now.*

With those words now echoing in my mind, I sprang forward, trying not to let any more nervous thoughts come to the forefront as I pelted ahead to snatch the food.

As I did this, I quickly observed that all of the voices behind me had suddenly gone silent, and Scourge's scolding finally stopped, causing me to assume that one of the cats had brought what I was doing to his attention.

Now there was *really* no turning back now.

I came to a sliding halt in front of the dog's meal, grabbing it in my jaws and simply tossing it to the side. *Here we go*.

And this action did have the desired effect, the dog quickly growing angrier than almost anything that I had ever seen and pelting straight for me.

"Nice knowing you, Mist!" I could hear Scraps shout behind me.

"Hush!" I hissed back at him as I tried to think fast, dodging the dog's advance.

Partly to throw it off, and partly because I was petrified.

And as I then watched the dog whirl around, and the reality of the situation hit me yet again, I found myself in a moment of complete and utter helplessness.

What the heck was I doing? How the heck had I gotten to this point, and how had I *let* myself get to this point? Why had I committed to this when I knew very well and had made it very clear that I can't fight to any capacity.

I had *no* idea what to do, or even where to start, and I had absolutely no frame of reference to try and figure out either of those things!

And to add to all of this horribleness, I was going to embarrass myself in front of these cats that already seemed to think fairly lowly of me. And Scourge, who for some reason saw some sort of potential in me, was going to realize that his initial, negative thoughts about me were right all along.

And I *hated* that that bothered me so much.

And to even top *that*, I'd become a failure all over again.

I let my own parents slip through my paws to vicious dogs before.

With that thought, to my own surprise, I actually thought that I'd have to sink to the ground in grief as this thought resurfaced. My legs did feel weak, and for a moment, I actually thought that I would have to run away in order to fight through my grief and then try again later.

But instead, I ruthlessly tried to push these thoughts down, and tried to replace them with the anger and determination that was beginning to blaze in my heart. *And I'm never going to let a dog take anything from me or dictate my future ever again.*

My anger now practically blinding me, I then leapt straight for the dog, using my seasoned skills to jump right on the brute's back, scratching it and letting its pained yelps drive me forward rather than guilt me in any way.

As I expected, the dog tried to snap at me and bite back at me a few times. I tried to dodge as best as I could, only receiving a few minor scratches in the process, and my adrenaline blocking any pain they may have brought.

I then eventually leapt completely off of it, thinking on my paws as I went straight for one of the Twoleg nest stone walls next to us, then proceeding to leap back down to the ground right in front of the dog. The dog whipped its head around from left to right, taking a moment to even process what I'd done before whirling itself back around and pelting back towards me.

But I was ready, running right towards it and ducking under it, screwing my eyes shut for a moment as I heard the dog's loud snap of its teeth come just a mouse-length's away from my tail. But I quickly shook my fear away once again, deciding to swerve back around and leap back on the dog's back from behind.

I then ran forward, trying to keep my balance the best I could despite the dog's wriggling, and feeling my anger rise more and more the more that I fought.

This was the kind of creature that had killed Sparrow and Chrissy.

This thought has simply made me sad before, but now that I had an opportunity, I was going to make it pay.

So, letting out a raged hiss, I then raised up my right paw, unsheathing it for one of the first times in my entire life, and then proceeded to use it to scratch the dog across the face.

I flicked my ears, startled, as the dog let out a very loud yelp of pain.

And as I realized that I had deeply scratched it across one of its eyes.

Both out of satisfaction and complete alarm, I found myself leaping back off of the dog, for some reason assuming (and hoping) that something like that would do the trick. *Please*.

And sure enough, I felt comfortable enough just staying where I was as I watched the brute struggle and wriggle in pain for just a few moments before it did indeed begin to run away.

And even after it disappeared into the darkness, its yelps and cries slowly fading into silence, I could only stare ahead at where it

disappeared, panting as I tried to come down from my anger and adrenaline.

I'd done it. I had completed my task. *And in a way...* I thought as I tried to push away another wave of grief. *I feel as if I have avenged my parents.*

Now completely overwhelmed with emotions and exhaustion, I let myself fall onto the ground. *Wow...*

Just a heartbeat after that, I actually heard pawsteps slowly approach from behind me, and soon enough, I found that Scourge was standing by my side. I simply stared up at him, anxiously awaiting his comment that surely would come after what had just happened.

"Hm," he eventually grunted, also staring ahead at where the dog had run away as he gave a single lash of his tail.

I sniffed at that. "Funny enough, that's actually more than I thought you'd say," I managed to purr.

I then let out a sigh, having to muster up some courage once again as I forced myself to press the tom. "However, I must still ask... how was that?"

Causing my stomach to twist, Scourge slowly turned his head to look down at me, his blue eyes actually deep and thoughtful. "Honestly?"

The anticipation now killing me, I let out a sigh and let my head fall down on my paws. "I have nothing to lose. Go for it."

"I can work with that."

I then flicked my ears, having to suppress a gasp as my head shot up to look at Scourge. "Really?" I asked in complete disbelief.

My excitement then beginning to rise, I actually nudged the tom's shoulder with my tail and let out a quiet purr of amusement. "Does that mean I get to eat now?"

Scourge's eyes remained on me as I then attempted to stand up, his eyes narrowed. "Hm, I'm surprised that you didn't want to go ahead and eat the dog's eyeball that you likely scratched out."

I then actually let out a gasp, stumbling just a bit as I cringed from the small wounds that I'd received in the fight. And to my shock, Scourge actually took my weight when I nearly fell to the side. "Ah, you saw that?" I replied sheepishly.

Scourge looked back at where the dog had run away once again. "The dog couldn't," he muttered.

I purred with amusement. "So, you think that you can work with that, and everything else that you just saw, huh?" I asked, finally finding my paws and standing up fully. "So, does that mean that I'm officially in now?"

Once again, Scourge stared back at me, his captivating blue eyes thoughtful as they began to narrow. And this time, I observed that they seemed to be at least a bit softer than usual. "I think that it does," he replied huskily after a few moments.

I took a deep breath, trying to remain calm as I then straightened up and gave the tom a single nod. "Hm. Alright."

But on the inside, my heart was soaring, and my stomach had practically flipped upside down. The past was fully behind me now, and I could forget about all of the pain and grief I had endured.

Today, my new life was beginning.

"But don't forget how stubborn you've been since you've gotten here. You're on thin ice," Scourge then hissed into my ear, breaking into my thoughts.

I rolled my eyes at the comment, then watching Scourge as he padded up to the three other toms that had simply been watching us with wide eyes. "We're done here," he meowed sharply to them, giving a lash of his tail. "Head back."

I then raised my eyebrows as Jumper let out a purr and gave a nudge to Hoot. "Ah, so did Ms. Fluffy Cat make it in?"

Hoot let out a snort, nudging his Clanmate back. "I think she would have made it in no matter what she did out there."

This time, despite the toms' very clear goal to get under Scourge's fur again, he simply ignored the comment, looking annoyed as he and I began to trail behind the three other BloodClan cats.

And as we began to walk through the Twolegplace, I couldn't help but watch Hoot and Jumper specifically as they continued to joke with each other. In fact, I had done so since I had first been introduced to them – right before we had all left for my mission.

Why? Well, simply put, they both looked so much like Barley that it wasn't even funny.

In my eyes, there was no *way* that they all weren't siblings or just related somehow. But how would that even be possible?

But then again... I thought as Scourge and I almost simultaneously swerved past a Twoleg. It's not completely outrageous...

I still remembered very well how Barley had actually managed to speak about this Twolegplace and BloodClan all that time ago, and how dangerous and off that it was and how I should avoid it. Was it possible that Barley *himself* had once lived here, and that was maybe why he'd been able to speak on it?

I couldn't be sure though, and I knew the only way that I could know was to ask him.

But even if there wasn't one question in the world that I had for him, I had missed him so, so much after all of this time. *Maybe I'll muster up the courage to visit him soon...*

I then nearly let out another gasp, abruptly being pulled out of my thoughts as I felt Scourge give me a rough nudge. And as soon as I looked back at him, he almost seemed to glance forward, possibly to check and see that the others in front of us weren't listening, before speaking. "Nice job," he hissed quietly back at me.

I blinked back at him, surprised by the harsh tone, for once. "Um... thanks?"

"Not with the dog, you idiot!" he barked back at me before lowering his voice down to a whisper. "Why would you tell them that I saved you from that dog once before?"

I began to shake my head back at him in bewilderment. "What!?" I asked out of pure shock. "Because you did!"

"And that's the *last* thing that I'd want any of these other idiots to know!" Scourge retorted, lashing his tail to his Clanmates ahead.

For a moment, I could only stare back at the black tom in amazement. "...even though you did it?"

"Yes!" Scourge then growled back at me, for some reason looking shocked that I couldn't understand his anger.

"I never thought that I'd run into a cat that was humiliated by putting another cat before themselves."

"My Clanmates were already questioning me bringing you here," Scourge continued, taking a step towards me and meeting my gaze harshly. "And this new information is surely going to spread like a wildfire, which is not going to help at all!"

I slowly shook my head back at him. "Not help with...?"

"It's going to make these cats think that I care about outsiders," he ranted on. "It's going to make them think that I just... crack *down* in certain situations, when I absolutely don't!"

I actually found the smallest speck of affection making my stomach twist as I then replied more quietly, "But... you did, Scourge."

And to my surprise, Scourge went silent for a few moments, looking ahead and letting out a sigh. "I can't believe that I did," he then muttered almost inaudibly.

I then found myself taking a step towards him this time. "It's really so horrible for you to care about another cat?" I then asked him more softly.

Scourge then flinched, almost stopping in his tracks for a moment

before looking coldly back at me. "What makes you think that I care about you?"

I shyly looked down at my paws for a moment, the hollowness in my stomach becoming more and more noticeable. "Well, I would mention the incident again, but I'm afraid to say it out loud..."

Scourge simply rolled his eyes, letting out a small hiss before breaking his gaze away. "Well, I don't," he then muttered dismissively.

As much as I hated to admit it, I actually felt a pang of hurt at that reply. "Are you sure?" I tried to press as casually as possible, despite that.

"I'm always sure."

"Okay," I then breathed, trying with all of my might to push down the negative emotions rising within me. *Why are they even there in the first place? I don't need this tom's care or approval. At least, not beyond his approval in order to let me into BloodClan.* "Then..."

"Then, what?" Scourge asked, suddenly looking genuinely intrigued.

"Then... maybe don't do these things?" I meowed wryly, tilting my head at Scourge. "If you're so determined to look so powerful, strong, and stoic, then all you have to do is *not* save me from dogs, or even let me into the Clan in the first place."

Scourge simply let out a groan and rolled his blue eyes. "Oh, come on!"

"Well? Am I wrong?" I then pressed, raising my voice slightly and turning more towards the BloodClan leader. "As far as I know, you had a choice in both of those matters."

I then watched, the hollowness in my stomach returning all over again as Scourge actually closed his eyes for a moment, letting out a deep, quick sigh. He then took several heartbeats to simply just stare ahead before meeting my gaze once again. "I suppose that I did," he meowed quietly to me before pelting forward towards his three Clanmates.

Chapter 14

[image]

Countless weird, foreign voices were flowing into my ears from where I stood behind one of the countless silver cylinder objects scattered around the city, peering past it at a small open area ahead, where several Twolegs were gathered.

They all seemed to be sitting in their own weird way, with their hind legs dangling down as they settled on some weird object. They were gathered in pairs, with a wooden platform between each of them. On that platform seemed to be their meal that they were picking from.

Immediately in front of me, and right in my view, was a very delicious-looking Twoleg meal – a soft beige concoction on the top and bottom that had something that looked like leaves and meat in between them.

And from where I was, it smelled *delicious*.

The two Twolegs around this specific meal – a male and a female – seemed pretty preoccupied speaking with each other and purring, I thought. But after a few moments, I then raised my eyebrows as I watched the female Twoleg stretch out one of her paws, and then proceed to intertwine it with the male Twoleg's. It then led the two to simply stare into each other's eyes, which were both sparkling like nothing I'd ever seen.

Is that the equivalent of intertwining tails, maybe? I couldn't help but wonder. *Like Sparrow and Chrissy did all of the time?*

Suddenly feeling another overwhelming wave of grief, I shook my head, physically and mentally shaking that thought away as I took a small step forward, deciding that I would make my move while the two were... *distracted*...

I then pelted forward without hesitation, leapt up at the moment

that felt right, and then snatched the food in my jaws. I then pelted away, not looking back as the two Twolegs yowled and gasped behind me.

Once I thought that I was in the clear and completely out of sight, I then slowed down to a trot, letting out a satisfied sigh despite my full mouth. *Nice one, Mist*, I thought as I then walked confidently through the Twolegplace.

And now being here for nearly half a moon, navigation around this place already felt so, so much easier. *But goodness, has it only felt like a few heartbeats...*

And as I traveled now, I didn't feel tense, or fear anything that I might find in my journey. Cats who looked at me didn't bat an eye, and those who did quickly noticed who I was, and that I wasn't a stranger anymore. *They know me as the weird traveling fluffy cat that managed to fight a dog despite never having fought in my life...* I realized, making me purr quietly in amusement. *It works, I suppose.*

I still had an incredibly long way to go, of course, but I was beginning to make my place here – something that would have sounded outrageous to Mist from just a few quarter moons ago. *But here we are...* I thought, letting out a huff as I finally arrived to the BloodClan camp. *I've actually made my place – something I never thought I'd do.*

I then eagerly padded into the main clearing, blinking and nodding to cats in greeting as I set down my catch, honestly so excited to present it.

Almost immediately, I recognized the long tabby fur of Fury – a she-cat that was just a bit older than me – approaching out of the corner of my eye. She seemed to be intently observing my Twoleg food, her one good eye surprised and curious. "Hey, I haven't seen one of those in a while," she then muttered. "How'd you manage to get one?"

I gave the food a small push towards Fury so that she could further give it a look. "It was at one of those weird places where Twolegs sit and eat at..." I finally tried to grasp the word that I hadn't been able

to recall at all earlier during my hunt. "What are they called, tables?"

I then looked down at my catch, my head shaking slowly. "It's one of the strangest things that I've ever seen!" But it smells pretty darn good, however. "What is it?"

"I think it's called a cheeseburger?" Fury answered after a moment of pondering. "Whatever that means."

Then, after the two of us exchanged a purr, she went on. "Did you steal some leftovers from an empty table or something?"

I sniffed and gave a shrug. "I suppose that would have been easier... but no!" I replied enthusiastically. "I snatched it right from a table with two Twolegs at it! They looked distracted and... in love, I think, so I grabbed it while they were annoyingly looking at each other."

I then gave a flick of my ears as something new abruptly came to the forefront of my mind. "By the way, where's Scourge? Do you think he'll deem this cheeseburger as acceptable?"

I tried to ignore the curious look that Fury flashed me with my words, and simply followed her tail as she gave it a lash. "He's over there speaking with Bone. Not sure about what." The tabby then looked over her shoulder back at the two toms, her eyes now gleaming with annoyance. "I tried to get in on their conversation, but they told me to go away."

She then looked back at me, giving a roll of her eyes. "Listen, I don't know who decided that Scourge was going to lead, and that Bone was going to be his little sidekick."

I then tilted my head to the side at those words, realizing that I also didn't have the fainted idea of that either. *I guess I was put under Scourge's spell of him being the leader of BloodClan, he's the toughest cat around, his word is holy, and that's that.* "So, Scourge fought off a dog, and everyone here decided that he was worthy of being their new leader?"

Fury gave another shrug. "That, and he also somewhat just put himself in that position," she then muttered bitterly. "Don't get me wrong, he is incredibly tough, incredibly strong, and quickly was able to rise to power and command anyone he wishes. I look up to him a lot."

Her eyes then narrowed, but at the same time, they seemed to gleam with a sort-of determination and desire. "But I..."

"Hey! What the heck do you think you're doing? I was still talking!"

I blinked in surprise at the harsh voice that I immediately recognized as Bone's, and after Fury and I exchanged a glance, we both looked to where Scourge and Bone had been speaking to see Scourge actually approaching the two of us, to my surprise.

"Hm, speak of the devil," Fury muttered simply, giving another lash of her tail.

Scourge had met my gaze intently for just a moment, causing my stomach to twist up, before he let out an annoyed hiss and looked back at Bone, who hadn't moved from their original spot. "Geez, keep your fur on!" he growled back at the large tom. "I'm just going to take a look at the prey that Mist just brought back."

"Since when have you been in such a hurry to do that?" Bone retorted, looking genuinely blindsided. "When a cat comes to you with prey, you usually just walk away and tell them that you don't care what it is, it's *food*."

Scourge whipped his head back around at Bone again once he'd come to a stop in front of me and Fury. "Maybe today I decided to care a bit more! Now shut up and wait a moment – I'll be back."

I then furrowed my eyebrows as his blue eyes then fell on Fury beside me. "What are you doing standing there like a clueless kit?" the black tom then hissed to her. "Go stand guard at the camp entrance – make sure there aren't any wanderers invading our territory that need to learn a lesson."

The tabby she-cat, after flashing me another glance, gave a roll of

her one eye. "Mist was a wanderer invading our territory..."

Scourge then seemed to suppress a hiss, while I was honestly trying to suppress a purr. "What was that?" he muttered to Fury through gritted teeth.

"Guarding!" Fury then exclaimed before trotting to the camp entrance, and then out of sight. I watched her go, my tail lashing back and forth out of humor and excitement before I then turned to face Scourge, who I had actually not seen at all today, strangely.

After having woken up in my usual sleeping spot inside of a small wooden crate, Bone had practically shaken me awake and had sent me away to try and find food, which had led me to find the... *cheeseburger* that I had brought back.

However, over the past couple of quarter moons, Scourge and I had actually interacted a *lot*, and to my surprise, a lot of that was due to Scourge's initiative.

I mean, for one, he always seemed to have one of those captivating blue eyes on me ever since he had let me into BloodClan. I practically couldn't take one step, say anything, or go anywhere without him basically appearing out of thin air and having something to say or interrogate me about it. *But he did say I was on thin ice after I fought that dog...* I remembered. *He's probably waiting for any possible excuse to kick me out, for all I know. He's probably shocked I could fight that dog at all!*

Speaking of that, Scourge had also kept his word on teaching me how to fight, attempting to teach me all of the most important moves that he knew. As I had expected, he had been an incredibly tough mentor so far. *Incredibly*. Tough.

But in a weird way, he simultaneously had been able to be patient and efficient, being very observant of me and actually giving me helpful, thoughtful critiques. He clearly knew his stuff, which was impressive considering he'd never really been taught how to fight himself.

And I guess he also seemed to know his stuff when it came to what

food his cats brought back, and seemed to look at my catches every time I brought back one, which he strangely was very persistent in doing right now.

So, I glanced down at my... my... *cheeseburger*, and flicked my tail towards it. "Well, is this acceptable?" I asked the BloodClan leader jokingly.

In reply, he simply shrugged. "It's food."

"Wow," I meowed with laughter in my voice. "Clearly it was worth it for you to come over and say that." *And what's even better, you just proved your buddy's point.*

And as Scourge rolled his eyes, I bent down to carry the catch in my jaws once again. "Should I put it in the food pile or give it to someone specific?"

I then furrowed my eyebrows, both amused and intrigued as Scourge's gaze then *very* abruptly became much more... dart-y. "Ah, no need. Uh..." He then trailed off, and I seriously wondered if I needed to grab someone to look Scourge over. While Scourge could be a cat of few words, he was rarely speechless. "Actually, would... would you-"

"Did you actually just tell Mist that that catch is satisfactory?"

I flicked my ears in surprise as Bone harshly cut off Scourge's words, and I looked over my shoulder to see the large black and white tom angrily approaching us. "That's going to feed two cats at best!"

Beside me, Scourge let out an angry hiss. "What a genius thing to say..." I then thought I could hear him mutter under his breath. "And your point is...?" he then growled to Bone more loudly, flashing his Clanmate an intimating look as his eyes narrowed down into slits. "*Bone?*"

With his leader's demeanor changing like it did, Bone actually took a step back, but his gaze was still firm. "All I'm saying is that we need more than this, and Mist should have stayed out longer to grab more." I then raised my eyebrows as Bone "undid" the step he had

taken, his eyes gleaming with mischief as his muzzle was suddenly close to Scourge's. "Too scared to tell her that?"

All I could do for a moment was stand, frozen, trying to process those words and trying to decide if they excited me or made me uneasy as Scourge now took a step towards Bone. "You asked her to get food, and she brought back food. Don't throw a fit unless you specify what you want."

"Then let me specify!" Bone then barked in Scourge's face. "We need more than this."

I then could simply watch, a chill running down my spine at the silence that followed Bone's words. Instead, those moments were filled with Scourge staring back at his sidekick, his blue eyes dark and threatening. *Goodness...* I thought as I watched the sight in awe. *I wouldn't wish receiving that look on my worst enemy.*

"Then more food you shall get," Scourge then muttered in an eerily warm tone. And oddly, even though he was giving into Bone's commands, his demeanor seemed to say the exact opposite. *And I'm not sure if he's just a brilliant manipulator, or just plain creepy.*

I then let out an almost inaudible snort. *Or both,* I then thought jokingly. *And no matter how I may feel about him, I'd never deny either.*

I then gave a single shocked blink of my own eyes. *Wait, what?*

I barely got time to process my own thoughts, Scourge then taking a step back and proceeding to pad away from both me and Bone. "Come on, Mist."

I simply followed the tom with my gaze as I shook my head in confusion. "Where are we going?"

Scourge came to a stop just next to the camp entrance and looked over his shoulder, his eyes still narrowed and dark. "Getting more food, as the O great Bone has asked that get done."

His eyes then managed to narrow even more as his gaze specifically landed on his Clanmate once again. "And he sure is lucky that I

agree with him," he then muttered bitterly before fully exiting camp.

I gave another bewildered shake of my head, gave Bone a quick nod in farewell, and then urgently tried to follow behind Scourge, who was already deep into the Twolegplace by the time I caught up to him. "And you're bringing me, of all cats? How come?"

Scourge, who still seemed to be in a bit of a huff, didn't look back as he continued in his travels. "Well, I think you'll be most of use considering what food I want to grab." He then finally slowed down, his fur brushing mine as he began to walk next to me. "Do you remember that one building that we passed the other day? The one that you said smelled amazing and had all of the delicious looking meat on display?"

Wow, I didn't even think that he was listening when I said that... I thought, genuinely surprised as I recalled our small walk on the way to our fight-training area. "Gosh, I could never forget!" I then exclaimed out loud, licking my lips as I tried to remember that wonderful smell. "But how could we possibly get something from there? Everything is inside of the building, and there always seem to be Twolegs there."

Scourge narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the sun, which was still making its way up to the sky. "Well, let's see. I've found that the place isn't nearly as packed with Twolegs this time of day, if any Twolegs aside from the owner are even there at all."

I then tilted my head to the side, still trying to hold his gaze as he then looked off to his side, the side opposite of me. "I figured that without as many barriers and your... skills, we might be able to find some way to grab something."

I felt my stomach twist at those words. "My *skills*, huh?" I asked teasingly, having enough courage to give Scourge an affectionate nudge. "My jumping and climbing skills? You're calling them skills now?"

Scourge didn't fully look back at me, but gave me the biggest side-eye I'd ever received as he then muttered, "I implicitly said that they

were skills before I even let you into the Clan, you idiot."

"Sure, but..." I then almost shocked myself as I suddenly decided to shift to my side, taking a step towards Scourge so that our flanks were nearly touching. "It's nice to hear it explicitly said."

And next to me, I felt Scourge's fur immediately begin to bristle, but to my complete bewilderment, he didn't step away.

And after that, silence. I guess I should have expected it. Scourge was probably debating whether or not to scratch my face off, and I hearing my own mind spiral as I debated whether or not to scratch my own face off at my bold move towards the BloodClan leader.

But again, I was unfortunately pulled away from my thoughts once again as I noticed Scourge flick his ears beside me. "There's the place up ahead."

I followed the tom's gaze, and immediately recognized the same building from just a few days ago. "Oh, yeah!" I meowed excitedly as we quickly made our way towards it, and I tried my best to scan it and all of its surroundings. "It looks pretty empty, thank goodness."

"Yes, good," Scourge agreed as we then made it to the front door, which, to our complete luck, was already propped wide open. My excitement and determination continuing to rise, I took my opportunity to peer inside through the open doorway, but I nearly let out a startled yelp as I felt Scourge's tail brush against my back. "Whoa, we can't let the owner see us yet!"

I then tried to hold back a hiss as I looked back at the black tom, flashing him an irritated, pleading look. "Just let me peer in a little!"

When Scourge didn't immediately object, I took a second try at poking my head inside, and trying not to be distracted by the delicious, scrumptious smell that was beginning to flood through my nose. *Stay strong, Mist...*

I could easily see what appeared to be the owner of this building

working at a... *table*, that seemed to have some food on it. *One of the many contributors of this wonderful smell...*

Behind the owner was a large display of meat, all of which were hidden behind what I now knew to be called "glass", which was a magical, invisible wall, basically. Above that, close to the roof of the place, were even more meats that were on display.

One in particular quickly caught my eye, and truthfully, I don't think I'd ever seen anything that looked so delicious and juicy in my entire life. It wasn't the largest piece of meat inside, but that, along with the cheeseburger that I'd found would surely make the most amazing meal for all of BloodClan to share. *Dang...*

I then flinched as I felt Scourge's breath by my ear, and I realized that he had quietly padded forward to stand behind me, also peering in.

Somehow, he already seemed to know exactly what I was looking at. "That piece of meat has been the talk of the town for days now," he whispered to me. "Twolegs take it away to eat themselves, but the owner here always prepares a new one and displays it, all nice and hot."

I then held back a purr of amusement as the tom then let out a huff and rolled his eyes. "So many cats in BloodClan have come whining to me about it, but I've never been able to figure out a way to get it."

While I had fully processed Scourge's words, the entire time he had been talking, I'd simply been staring ahead, taking in all of the surroundings as my mind tried to construct a plan, which seemed to snap immediately. "Even if we try to sneak behind the Twoleg, he's surely going to notice us at one point, so we might as well distract and occupy him immediately," I meowed quietly, spewing my thoughts out loud.

I then gave a small nod. "I'm sure I can make that jump up to the meat, so you head to the Twoleg and I'll head straight for the prize," I went on. "Give the Twoleg a few light scratches while I try to get up there."

I then looked back at Scourge with narrowed eyes. "*Light* scratches."

Scourge narrowed his eyes back at me. "I can't make any promises."

I simply let out an amused, dismissive grunt, before returning my gaze to the building owner. "Well, while he's busy trying to get rid of you and... being in pain, I'll jump onto that table behind him, and then leap straight up to that meat and..." I then scanned my eyes around the store, further processing everything that was inside. "I'll run across those empty... *shelves* so that the Twoleg can't even get to me if you lose him. I'll then leap down and..."

I then looked back at Scourge once again, giving him a satisfied shrug. "We have the meat!"

For a moment, I found that I was only waiting for the BloodClan leader's response. And after a few silent heartbeats went by, I couldn't help but shift nervously as I continued to await said response.

All he was giving me now was an unreadable gaze into my own eyes, which made my stomach twist once more. "Well?" I couldn't help but ask after a few more heartbeats. "Does that work?"

To my relief, that finally brought Scourge to let out a sigh and shake his head quickly. "I guess we won't know until we try," he then muttered, slightly to my disappointment. "Let's do it."

I don't know why I still expected to receive even a mouse-length's worth of praise from this tom.

However, it was enough for me to push on, and almost simultaneously, Scourge and I happened to step to our side, now in view to anyone inside of the building.

I immediately then felt Scourge give me a light nudge, and I noticed that he was looking straight up at the meat. "Are you sure you can make that jump?" Then, when I flashed him a surprised look due to his sudden show of concern, he gave a shrug and shook his head quickly. "I didn't bring you here for you to screw up."

I continued to stare at him, my eyes narrowing down into slits.

"Unless the Twoleg grabs me, I'm almost certain that I can." I then gave my own head a shake, deciding to rephrase my words. "I *am* certain."

"I won't let that happen," Scourge murmured, and before I could give any sort of response, I noticed him begin to crouch down slightly. "You ready?"

I mirrored his position as much as I could, trying to recall all of the training that he'd given me, as well as the skills that had run through my blood for my entire life. "Whenever you are."

Scourge gave me the smallest nod, and thankfully, didn't give me any extra moment to grow scared as he gave me the signal. "Okay... go!"

The both of us then pelted forward, with Scourge heading straight for the Twoleg as I had directed, scratching him on his leg and letting out a determined hiss as the Twoleg let out an alarmed yelp.

I didn't hesitate to do my part, honestly kind of scared for the Twoleg as I made my first leap on to the table behind it, then leaping up to the shelf near the roof where the meat was sitting, still fresh, on a flat piece of shiny stone,

And still warm.

Thank goodness, I very easily made my leap there, not even falling short at all. I then was easily able to grab the meat and continue to the next step of my plan, running across the empty shelves ahead.

However I quickly realized that I'd run into my first, and hopefully last problem with this scheme – this meat was very heavy, and my jaw almost suddenly seemed to hurt as I tried to run with the large object.

And even worse, I could already feel the meat beginning to slip out of my mouth. "Scourge!" was all I could think to shout in my panic, and full mouth.

And even in the midst of the BloodClan leader attempting to "occupy" the Twoleg, he still managed to glance over at me and

almost immediately figure out my situation. "Hold on!" he shouted after giving the Twoleg a scratch on its back. "I'll go over there, and then you can drop it to me!"

"But the Twoleg would never let you!" I shouted as I watched the Twoleg actually attempt to grab Scourge with his large paws despite his injuries.

"Oh, please!"

Without hesitation, Scourge then scratched the Twoleg's paw, which had very conveniently been gripping his injured back. "No way he can grab me now!"

Then, as quickly as I'd seen any cat run, he pelted ahead until he was right under the shelves I was on. "Drop it now!"

I immediately did as I was told, impressed as Scourge made a small leap straight up, catching the entire piece of meat in his jaws. He then made a run for the door, actually stopping for a moment and seeming to watch as I tried to make my own escape, leaping down to the ground and running across the room before following him out.

And although we were now out of the building, we continued to run, swerving to our left to the side of the building, closer to the darkness where the Twoleg surely wouldn't be able to find us. We both then practically skidded to a stop, both panting as we leaned onto the side of the building.

"Well," I eventually puffed out after taking a few moments to catch my breath. "Mission accomplished, huh?"

Scourge finally dropped the meat onto the ground, nodding to it and then flashing me a wry look. "I'd say so," he muttered. "It was a good plan. It was ought to work."

I flicked my ears, surprised by the praise. "Thank you," I sighed, looking shyly down at my paws. "And... thank you for trusting me with it, and this mission."

Scourge looked off, letting out another sigh and giving a shrug. "It's

like I said, you... you have some rare skills."

Still not looking at the tom, and still overwhelmed by the praise, I then gave a shrug and shake of my head in return. "Ah, it's just moons of practice..." *But... I'll still take the credit!*

"Speaking of practice," Scourge then meowed, actually flicking my ear with his tail, "You might need some with carrying heavy pieces of meat."

I couldn't help but let out a purr of amusement at that comment, trying not to feel too embarrassed that I hadn't managed to carry that lump for very long at *all*. "I suppose so!" I replied. I then flicked his ear in return. "Thank you for helping me at the end there. I would have dropped that meat, and my teeth would have probably come with it."

"Sure," Scourge murmured after a sniff. "I'm glad you didn't lose your teeth."

Huh...

I furrowed my eyebrows, finding several things about what the tom had said very interesting, and... new. "Hm," I then grunted out loud as I tilted my head to the side. "Since when do you care about what happens to me?"

Scourge stared back at me, and I honestly couldn't tell whether or not he was simply pretending to look dubious. He mainly just looked extremely annoyed. "I said that I'm glad that you didn't lose your teeth."

For some reason, something drove me to continue to push the leader as I stood up. "If you didn't care about me, you couldn't care less if I had teeth or not!"

"Either way," Scourge meowed, almost cutting me off as he also stood up. And I forced myself to keep his gaze despite his blue eyes blazing with who-knows-what. "Why do you care so much if I care about you?"

A very good question.

A question that I didn't know how to answer, or maybe just didn't want to answer. And for several moments, I could just stare back at the black tom, my stomach feeling like it was about to explode with how many butterflies fluttered within it.

And to my surprise, Scourge actually seemed to expect and actually *want* an answer, his eyes actually seeming to gleam with a hint of curiosity and pleading.

But with my gaze still staring deep into his, I simply replied, "You didn't answer my question."

Scourge gave a shocked blink of his eyes before he let them narrow into slits. "You aren't answering mine, either."

I narrowed my eyes back at him, and it suddenly felt as if I'd swallowed a few more butterflies. "Well, how about that."

And after that, silence. Again.

But there was already something so different about this silence. It actually felt... *exciting,* and terrifying in the best way possible.

It was nothing that felt too long or uncomfortable. In fact, it felt way too short.

I wasn't sure if it was just on my end or both, but so much anticipation seemed to be building up, and it felt as if there were words left unsaid as I felt dozens of lightning bolts seem to crackle in the gap between the two of us.

And if I had told myself that we'd have a moment like this just a few quarters moons ago, I probably would have not believed me, and then would have violently vomited.

This Bloodclan leader who was arrogant, rude, aggressive, and emotionally unavailable on so many levels, was doing this to me. Somehow, I was able to look past all of that, and he still had managed to put me under such a spell.

And honestly, I could have stayed just like that for the longest time, if Scourge hadn't decided to finally clear his throat and violently

break his gaze from mine, causing me to do the same. "Well, anyway, we should get this meat back before we start hearing Bone's complaining yowls all the way from over here."

My fur still slightly raised and my stomach still swirling, I gave a quick shake of my head in an attempt to focus. "Yes, agreed," I murmured before glancing down at our new catch. "This is going to feed at least a few cats. Who are you going to feed it to? Do we get to have a taste?"

"Hm, whoever wants to fight over it can do as they please. But... um..."

I then flicked my ears, intrigued as Scourge began to stammer and hesitate for the second time today. "I figured I'd just let the others take this meat, and we... we could... share the burger that you grabbed."

Immediately, my excitement and joy managed to overtake the shock at the fact that Scourge had asked such a question. "Really?" I asked in a tone that was probably way too enthusiastic for Scourge to handle.

And also, not wanting to lose this opportunity, for once, I decided not to press him. "Okay," I then breathed before attempting to lift up the meat by myself once again.

"Oh, no way you're carrying that by yourself again," Scourge almost immediately meowed, also bending down to grip the meat in his jaws.

Time to welcome in more butterflies. "You'll help me carry this back?"

"Sure," Scourge meowed through his full mouth, briefly flashing me a look that wasn't completely cold as we then began to travel back. "I could care a little less if you had teeth or not."

Chapter 15

[image]

"Right. Okay, now raise your leg a bit more..." I tried with all of my might to hold my crouched position as I felt Scourge slightly lift my right front leg with his tail. "Just like that," the black tom then muttered with a sharp nod. "Obviously you'll have to adjust based on who or where you're slashing at, but that's general how you'd be positioned."

I gave a sharp nod in return, slightly shifting back and forth to get used to the position Scourge had just shown me – the position to prep for a slash to the throat. "Okay! Neat," I meowed before standing up fully. "Are we done here?"

Scourge immediately narrowed his blue eyes. "Very funny. Try the move."

While trying to hold in a purr of amusement, I stared back at the tom with pleading eyes. "I'd almost rather let your teaching sink in, and then I can try it tomorrow!"

"If you don't try it now, you won't even be able to do it tomorrow," Scourge retorted, taking a step towards me. "Do it."

"And just embarrass myself all over again?" I then sighed. *I don't think anyone would have the spirit to try a move like this again when they mess it up majorly the first time...* I told myself. *Especially when "messing up" means thrusting your leg forward and accidently throwing yourself to the side...*

"It wasn't that bad," Scourge murmured, giving a roll of his eyes.

I had to admit, hearing that from him was immensely relieving. *However...* "For all I know, if I mess it up again, you're kicking me out of here," I only half-teasingly pointed out.

"Well, that's not happening," Scourge then muttered dismissively as

he then flicked his tail, prompting me to get back into position. "So just try the move."

I started to do so, but quickly froze. "There's no way you'd kick me out of here?"

"No," Scourge answered simply. "Try the move."

But I couldn't help but push on, actually surprised that he'd made that initial statement of not kicking me out. "Is it because I'm useful, or because you like having me here?" I then winked, which I honestly did without hesitation. *First, I had no problem talking back to him – that's still the case – and now I have absolutely no problem joking with him.*

Well... *maybe* joking.

Of course, there was never much reciprocation either way. Not *much*. "Try the move," Scourge meowed again as he stared back at me, his expression giving nothing away.

I then tilted my head to the side. "I have to try the move being full of oblivion?"

"Yes, Mist," Scourge then muttered through gritted teeth. "Try the move."

I then gave a roll of my own eyes, finally giving in and taking the situation more seriously. *If anything, my teasing is what is going to ever get me kicked out of here...* "Fine. Here goes."

Then, after a deep breath and fully getting into position, I proceeded to try the front-paw slash that Scourge had been spending the latter half of the day showing me, trying to give the biggest gash possible on the pillow that Scourge had set in front of me.

Thank goodness, this second attempt was a complete success, my fully unsheathed claws slashing through the cloth, but causing feathers to fly *everywhere*.

I began to shake my head quickly, purring with amusement as

several feathers seemed to gravitate towards my eyes and nose. "Hah! Just pretend that all of these feathers are blood," I meowed jokingly just before having to let out a sneeze. "Was that okay?"

I then let out another purr of amusement as I looked at Scourge to see his black fur covered in feathers as well. Looking embarrassed, he quickly gave a shake of his own fur. "I guess it's enough for me to let you stay here."

"Wait, so that really was at stake?" I asked, surprised, as I tried to now shake a feather off that was impairing my vision.

However, I could hear Scourge padding up to stand just in front of me. "Teasing," he then meowed. I then felt my fur begin to raise as I then saw his tail try to brush the feather off the tip of my nose. When that didn't work, he proceeded to use his own nose to get it off. "I can't tease?"

For several moments, I couldn't even speak as Scourge took a pawstep back. "I-I didn't think it was possible..." I eventually forced out as I suddenly felt like some of the feathers had made their way to my stomach. "Um-"

"Shhh! Hold on."

"Excuse me?" I then asked in surprise after shaking off the last of the feathers, bewildered that the tom had cut me off. *Well, I suppose it probably would have happened anyway...* "What-?"

"Shut up! Hold on!"

This time, I decided to comply, only a *little* disappointed. *I suppose this is the Scourge that is more familiar to me*.

But along with that, my curiosity took the forefront as I then watched Scourge shake the rest of his feathers off and then slowly begin to pad forward. And as I then followed his gaze, I quickly noticed two toms that I didn't recognize padding into the BloodClan camp – conveniently just as they were also coming into earshot.

"Is this the place?" a very large, dark brown tabby tom with many scars asked the tom next to him, his amber eyes narrowed and dark.

The other tom, who was light gray with blue eyes, gave a single nod. "This is it. Now, remember what I told you. The cat we're going to meet holds command over many cats," he meowed to the tabby. "We must treat him with respect."

Goodness... I thought, briefly glancing at Scourge again, who was watching the two cats intently. *I used to think that Scourge just had a big head... but he really is so well-known and honored around here...*

I then let out an almost inaudible snort. *Because I unfortunately assume that that's who that tom is talking about.*

I then watched as Bone approached the two newcomers, his fur slightly bristled. "Identify yourselves," Bone nearly growled. "We don't like strangers here."

No kidding.

To my surprise, the smaller gray tom walked up to meet Bone without hesitation. "Greetings, Bone. Remember me?"

After these words, I found that Bone looked more intrigued than anything, but his fur still slightly seemed to stick out with indignation. "So you've come back, have you, Boulder?"

In front of me, Scourge continued to stay silent and simply watch the three cats speak to each other, his blue eyes dark and menacing. And he almost seemed to be staying as still as possible as the three toms then proceeded to walk deeper into camp.

"Scourge needs to hear this," Boulder then insisted to Bone. "It could be to his advantage."

I obviously looked over at Scourge again with those words. Nothing.

I then looked back at Bone, who seemed to be hesitating to allow what I assumed to be an old Clanmate and a stranger to speak to his leader. However, after another moment's hesitation, he stepped aside. "Alright. Go ahead."

Their permission now being granted, I then anxiously observed as

Boulder and the mysterious, very intimidating-looking dark tabby tom walked towards where Scourge and I were standing. Scourge continued to stand up straight, his tail now raised and looking more than ready to hear what they had to say.

Boulder then gave the tabby the smallest nudge, nodding ahead towards the BloodClan leader. "There's Scourge."

I then raised my eyebrows as the tabby then blinked, letting out a snort. "*That's* Scourge?" he asked Boulder, almost purring. "He's no bigger than an apprentice!"

"Shhh!" Thankfully Boulder silenced the stranger before I tempted myself to. "This may not be a Clan as we know it, but these cats would *kill* if their leader ordered them to."

Whoa... I thought as let Boulder's latest words sink in. *I mean, that's true, and several cats here would kill if Scourge instructed them to without hesitation, but... would I ever do that? Would I actually kill a cat just because Scourge told me to?*

I then furrowed my eyebrows. *Would I even have a choice?*

I then pulled myself out of my thoughts as I then noticed Scourge finally make a move and step forward. "It seems that I have visitors," he murmured. He then gave a nod specifically to Boulder. "I wasn't expecting to see you again, Boulder. I heard you'd gone to live in the forest."

Boulder gave a proud nod. "Yes, Scourge. I have."

I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows at this fact. Boulder used to live here in BloodClan, and then left to live in the forest? Is he maybe one of the wild cats that Barley told me about?

"So, what are you doing here?" Scourge asked, the slightest of snarkiness in his meow as he broke me out of my thoughts. "Have you changed your mind and come crawling back? Do you expect me to welcome you?"

I wouldn't.

"No, Scourge," Boulder went on, clearly not phased by his former leader. "It's a good life in the forest. There is plenty of fresh-kill, no Twolegs-"

"So what do you want?" Scourge insisted, cutting Boulder off, to my dismay. *I almost wanted to hear Boulder say more... but not hearing about how wonderful the forest is, is to my benefit, as much as I may agree.*

I then shifted my gaze to the dark tabby stranger as he finally stepped forward. I had to admit, even just looking at him sent a chill down my spine. And while I hated that he had poked fun at Scourge's smaller size, he did make Scourge look quite little compared to him. *Physically*, at least.

"I am Tigerstar, the leader of ShadowClan."

ShadowClan? I repeated in my mind. *Is that maybe on of the wild cat groups in the forest? Where Boulder is from?*

I then watched as Tigerstar let out a long, deep sigh. "And as much as I hate to admit it, I need your help, Scourge."

As I then shifted my glance back over to Scourge, I narrowed my eyes with interest as I didn't immediately hear his reply.

Because honestly, it was rare that a day went by that some stranger *didn't* approach Scourge for help, whether that was for food, shelter, or even to send some cat out to fight another cat or a dog. And when any of that happened, Scourge was tough but dignified every time, either doing as they asked or sending the nuisances away.

But this time, he seemed to be processing Tigerstar's words as if he'd just given him the biggest proposition of his life.

And it felt like several lifetimes before he finally turned his head, looking at Bone and then back at me. "I'll be right back," he then muttered before flicking his tail towards Tigerstar and Boulder and leading them towards the corner of camp.

And with that, I gave a slightly delayed nod, exchanged a curious look with Bone, and then decided to pad over to my nest while the

three of them talked. *I want to do nothing more than eavesdrop, however...* I thought as I made my way to my crate that I'd been sleeping under for the last two moons or so. *I do need to straighten out my nest in here just a little.* And while this crate was fairly close to where the three toms were gathered, it was just far enough away to where I couldn't comprehend what they were saying.

And oh *how* I wish I could. I seriously couldn't help but wonder what a cat like Tigerstar – who looked almost just as powerful and intimidating as Scourge – could possibly need help with. *And if he really came from one of those groups of wild cats, what kind of trouble are they in right now?*

I then let out a sigh as I began to get rid of the ruffles in my nest made of pieces of cloth and leaves. *It must be a pretty rare situation. Aside from this, Barley always seemed to speak so highly of the wild cats and the way they lived... and Boulder seemed to think so fondly of it and living in the forest.*

I then had to hold back another sigh as desire and grief began to rise from my stomach and fully encompass my heart. *Gosh, I miss it so much...* I thought as my heart then ached, feeling so heavy with a tug for that *familiarity and safety...*

I then gave some violent shakes of my head. *But that's exactly what I'm trying to avoid,* I tried to tell myself. *It's too soon.*

I then figured it was best to keep my mind fairly blank as I then continued on my nest, ensuring the best amount of comfort for the next time I slept in it. And after a while of deep concentration on this, the situation currently occurring struck my mind like a monster, and I could hardly believe that I had been able to stay distracted from it for this long.

And just as I happened to look over my shoulder, it appeared as if Tigerstar and Boulder were leaving, with Scourge breaking away from them and padding deeper into camp. He looked very, *very* deep in thought, and clearly something that the two toms had told him had left some mark.

And weirdly, he even looked satisfied and... *happy*, almost?

I was already overwhelmed with curiosity, and I felt like I had no choice but to finish my task and run up to meet the BloodClan leader. "Hey! So, what was that all about? What did Tigerstar want?"

To my surprise, Scourge just gave a shake of his head, dismissively brushing his tail along my flank. "Oh, he just needs some help with some situation that's going on in the forest."

I nodded quickly, nowhere near satisfied with that answer. "Yeah, Boulder seemed to allude to something. What's going on?"

"Just some trouble that might threaten Tigerstar and his leadership," Scourge murmured with a shrug. Although, the look in his eyes told a different story. "Nothing that's a big deal."

I stared at Scourge as I continued to be shocked by his behavior. "It sure sounded like it was a big deal, and you all were talking for quite a while."

I then found myself having to give the tom a soft nudge when he didn't immediately reply. "Scourge?"

Scourge then looked back at me, staring at me for a few moments with his eyebrows furrowed. Then after he gave a quick shake of his head, he murmured, "It's never a big deal when I'm taking care of it."

"I see," I murmured back with a slow nod. *And I guess I shouldn't make a big deal out of it if he isn't...* I thought. I then couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration as I then observed the tom's confident, proud stance. *Goodness, of all cats that Tigerstar could have come to for help, he went to Scourge. So many cats chose to come to Scourge to help with their situation... Boulder said it – he's so respected around here...* "And you can trust this... Tigerstar?"

"Oh, absolutely," Scourge immediately replied in a surprisingly menacing tone. "Absolutely."

Although the words were meant to be reassuring, I couldn't help but feel a pang of nerves at Scourge's answer.

To my bewilderment, he seemed to notice, and I felt his tail brush my flank once again. "It's nothing to worry about, Mist. Seriously."

And I *hated* that he had noticed. "Me, worried?" I retorted, taking a step back from the BloodClan leader. "Who said I was worried?"

Scourge simply let out a huff and broke his gaze away from mine. "Unfortunately I know you well enough to tell when you're worried."

More feathers. "No one in this Clan can afford to get worried!" I insisted to the tom before giving one of my paws a lick and running it over my ear.

I then shyly flicked my gaze back towards Scourge just briefly. "Especially me, with those eyes of yours practically glued to my flank all of the time."

Scourge immediately whipped himself in my direction again, his blue eyes wide as I tried to hold back a *mrrow* of laughter. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing..." I meowed warmly as I then began to turn around and walk away, already having too much fun with this. "Nothing at all."

"Unfortunately I also know you well enough to care about the meaning behind your words!" Scourge then called out, running forward to intercept me. "Because I insist that you tell me what you mean by that."

I began to shake my head slowly, amazed that I managed to get under his fur like this. *Anything that threatens his stoic, tough, and dignified manner will make him lose his mind...* "If I told you, I think I'd have to kill you."

Scourge was then silent for a moment. "Are you trying to say that I stare at you?"

I simply met my gaze with his, my chin slightly raised. "I'm not worried about the Tigerstar situation, Scourge."

"You're really going to leave me hanging like that?" Scourge then

replied, looking utterly irritated and dumbfounded.

"Hey, I can tease too, and I'm rather enjoying it!" I purred, pulling the bold move of brushing my own muzzle against the side of Scourge's. I then backed away quickly in case he suddenly decided to claw my mouth off.

But he didn't, and instead stared back at me with wide, almost taken-aback eyes. "And even if I didn't leave you hanging," I then went on, "would you really want to admit that you do stare at me?"

Scourge then immediately looked away, letting out a quiet hiss.

And while he would go on to change the subject, to my now complete satisfaction, he didn't deny what I'd accused him of. "Well, I'm glad you're not worried about the Tigerstar situation. You shouldn't be."

I then found myself having to try and meet his gaze as he stared off to his side, his eyes narrowed. "I would hope not," I muttered. "I know you're more than capable to help him, with whatever is going on."

"Of course," Scourge them nearly whispered, his gaze now dark from what I could see. "I'm certain."

"Good," I slowly nodded, feeling another chill run down my spine as I felt a small pang of dread. "Good."

"Yes, very good," Scourge immediately replied in an oddly warm whisper. And as he continued to stare off, he suddenly seemed very, very far away. "Tigerstar is in good paws."

Chapter 16

[image]

It was nearly moonhigh, and I was one of the last cats awake in the BloodClan camp.

After a day spent hunting for food and then standing guard at the camp entrance, I had eaten a quarter of a cheeseburger and then settled near one of the camp corners – sharpening my claws on some old chicken bones. The moon was casting over my paws perfectly, giving me the exact view I needed as it rose higher into the sky.

So, I blinked in surprise when eventually a shadow was cast over my work, and I looked up to see the patchy black and white tortoiseshell pelt of Gremlin approaching me, her green eyes bright through the darkness.

She came to a stop after I gave her a lash in greeting, and took a glance down at my paws. "They as sharp as Scourge's yet?"

I purred in amusement and followed the she-cat's gaze. "Ah, these?" I asked her, further unsheathing my claws and looking at one of my paws more closely. "Even if they were, they aren't nearly as *big* as his! I don't know what kind of genes that cat has." Or where the heck he is...

But I shook off that thought as Gremlin let out another purr. "No kidding!" she exclaimed before then sitting down next to me. "But anyway, tomorrow, are you up for coming with me to chase away a couple of rascals who have been wandering around the Twolegplace?"

"Ooo, what kind of rascals?" I asked excitedly as I shifted a bit closer to the she-cat.

"Oh, I caught them digging through a trash can when I was out earlier, and I don't think any other BloodClan cats would be happy

to find out that they're here," Gremlin replied, giving a roll of her eyes. She then gave me a hard nudge on the shoulder with her tail. "And I thought that with your amazing fighting skills and that long fur of yours making you look triple your size when it bristles, we'd be able to scare them off in no time!"

"Aw, you flatter me!" I purred, giving Gremlin a hard nudge back. "But I am totally up for that. First thing in the morning?"

Gremlin snorted, looking off as if the two cats she were talking about were just a little ways away. "Please, those idiots probably won't be awake until sunhigh!"

"Then twilight it is!"

Gremlin let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "You're very wise," she then meowed, standing up and giving a shake of her fur. "See you then, Mist."

I gave a nod in farewell as the tortoiseshell then turned away, heading off to where I assumed her nest was. "Bye!" I quietly called out before promptly continuing on my claws, not being able to help feeling a twinge of satisfaction at being asked to join someone on an expedition.

Sure, Gremlin and I had become acquainted, but it still was an indication to me that I was really beginning to fit into this Clan. *When I first arrived here I was only a nuisance and a burden, when I got accepted into the Clan, I was just a bit of an annoyance, and now... I'm just... accepted? Rather than being pushed away, I'm being embraced?*

I then let out a sniff. *Well, "embraced" sounds like too warm of a words to use for these cats... but either way...*

I then realized I was shaking my head slowly in amazement as I dove deeper into my thoughts. *I'm a BloodClan cat... and I guess this is really my home now. For the rest of my life.* It was by no means paradise, it never had been, but it was home. And I was almost thankful that it was more familiar to me than the forest ever had been. *Or, at least, I want it to be.*

I then was thankful to be pulled out my thoughts once again when yet another shadow was cast over my task. I shook my head quickly, feeling a twinge of hope that then exploded out into excitement as I quickly recognized the lithe shape of Scourge slinking back into camp, appearing to finally be returning from wherever he'd been the entire day.

And as ecstatic as I was to see him, I stayed in my spot and simply watched him as he padded deeper into camp. I also figured that getting to observe his demeanor or his expression could possibly give away what he had been up to.

Because I still had *no* idea what that was.

Since that *Tigerstar* had first come to visit, approaching the BloodClan leader with some sort of problem and proposition, Scourge had made himself quite scarce lately – leaving the camp every day at least once to do what I assume was follow through with said problem and proposition.

And oddly enough, with each day that went on, the more elusive that Scourge seemed to become, and there was always a weird sort-of joyful mischief in his blue eyes whenever he returned...

But that was honestly the least of my worries. I absolutely *hated* to admit it, but I always felt a pit in my stomach at the thought of not getting to see the tom as often lately. I also absolutely *hated* to acknowledge just how excited and relieved I had been to see him walk into camp just now.

And I watched intently as he then walked deeper into camp, unfortunately his expression and his demeanor giving nothing away as he then made it to the wall of one of the buildings that enclosed the clearing. I then raised my eyebrows as he then began to climb up its brick walls, very swiftly working his way up to the top and sitting down at the top.

I couldn't help but give a small smirk and nod. *He's definitely gotten so much better at climbing after that lesson I gave him...*

I then continued to stare up at him, sure that he couldn't see me

from where he sat at the top of the building, simply looking off at the Twolegplace below him. He looked so strong and authoritative, even when he was alone. He also looked deeper in thought than I had ever seen him, and I had never wanted to live inside of his head more.

And I wasn't sure if it was my curiosity once again, my concern for the tom, or... simply my need to see and talk to him that brought me to eventually stand up, follow Scourge's path through camp and then proceed to also climb up the brick wall and join the BloodClan leader at his spot.

To my surprise, he didn't seem to notice me initially once I'd made it to the top. "Hey there," I meowed softly as I padded up to him.

My words seemed to pull him out of his trance, causing him to flinch and give a violent shake of his head before looking back at me with wide eyes. For whatever reason, he was looking at me as if there were three mice prancing on my head. "Mist!" he then exclaimed. "What are you doing up here!?"

I shook my head back at him, completely baffled by his reaction. "I... was just coming up to say hello?" I replied in confusion. "What, is that too polite for a BloodClan cat to do?"

"I don't care," Scourge then muttered coldly, lashing his tail as if to send me away. "Say hello another time. I'm busy."

"You are?" I almost purred, actually amused by how he was acting.

"Yes, very!"

"You sure look like it!"

"Well, I am!" Scourge then hissed, whipping his head back towards me, his blue eyes narrowed. "And I was hoping for some peace and quiet."

I continued to shake my head back at him in amazement. "Then don't become the leader of BloodClan."

"Mist, please."

"Well, it's the truth!" I jokingly insisted, and I only got a sigh in return.

And although I teased, I was still more than surprised than Scourge was so determined to get me away from him, and I worried what had incited this change...

So, I couldn't help but still take a step closer to him, trying to approach him with a softer gaze. "Hey, did something happen when you went out to the forest today?"

Scourge looked appalled that I had asked the question. "No!"

"Scourge."

"Nothing happened!" he continued to insisted, his fur beginning to bristle. "It was a long day and I need time to gather my thoughts. How hard is that to understand?"

I nearly flinched, and I felt my stomach nearly drop as it finally hit me that Scourge was actually being fully serious. "...But-"

"Geez, Mist, get it into your head!" Scourge growled, quickly cutting me off as he fully turned away from me. "I told you to leave me alone!"

And now that I knew that Scourge was being serious, that he actually wanted me gone, I was now trying my hardest to not let on to the tom just how much that hurt me. *And I hate that it hurts me, but it sure does...*

So, I simply closed my eyes and sighed. "Fine," I soon forced out. "I'm sorry that I bothered you."

Scourge eventually sat down a few tail-lengths away, his back facing me. "Good, I'm glad."

I then found myself following him, still feeling hurt, but now feeling a second wind of bewilderment and curiosity. "What is wrong with you?"

"Gosh, Mist, nothing!"

"For some reason I have a hard time believing that," I insisted as I stopped just behind the tom. "And unfortunately – quoting *you* by the way – I care about you enough to want to know the meaning behind your words."

Scourge let out a groan, looking up to the sky for a moment as he seemed to roll his eyes. "Come on..."

"Well? I can tell something is different," I pressed to him – believing this fully despite this cold, closed-off and rude demeanor being Scourge's default. *Somehow, being around him, I've managed to discover that he has some dimension...*

I then forced myself to take another step closer to him, close enough to where I was surely in his peripheral view. "You know you can tell me, Scourge."

I actually felt a twinge of hope when, after a few heartbeats, Scourge let out a sigh and looked over his shoulder, letting his blue gaze rest on me. "You said it yourself – I am the leader of this Clan, and now I am a leader of this Clan that is involved with another group of cats in the forest," he meowed to me, his voice low but still sharp. "I am very busy, stakes are high right now, and I have..."

I narrowed my eyes as he hesitated for a moment. "I have very important plans that I feel that I must follow through with," he then continued. "Anything else that meddles with any of that is a waste of time and... I must focus."

For several moments, I could just stare at the back of the tom's head as he then broke his gaze away once again, and feeling as if my heart had fallen all the way down to the floor of the BloodClan camp. "Hm..." I eventually murmured, trying to keep my voice steady as I narrowed my eyes. "So, this is a bit more than just wanting me to give you some peace and quiet for the night, huh?"

Scourge didn't look back at me, but he let out a huff and gave a shake of his head. "Mist..."

"No, that's okay!" I insisted to the tom, hoping he would catch my bitter tone. "You explained yourself quite well – you're just keeping

your priorities straight, which is wonderful. I'm so glad that you are."

I then had to close my eyes for a moment as I went on, my voice a bit softer. "But... I can't help but feel a bit blindsided, I guess."

Scourge just barely turned his head to the side to look back at me. "Blindsided?" he repeated, only sounding slightly condescending. "Why?"

"Oh, don't be stupid, Scourge!" I couldn't help but hiss back at him. "At this point, I've almost spent more time with you than I have my... my own *parents*, for goodness sake!"

Then, after having to take a moment, I went on, trying to make my voice firmer. "A lot of that was because of *your* initiative. And look, I know you're busy, but..." I then found myself looking to my side, taking a quick glance at the city view. "I guess there are ways to tell me that without... being so harsh, okay?"

"Why are you acting like I've committed a crime?" Scourge demanded, standing up, now staring at the back of my head as I stared out at the Twolegplace. "I don't owe you anything, Mist! I have all the right to send you away!"

Although Scourge couldn't see it, I had to screw my eyes shut, almost as if to shield the hurt that was building up inside of me once again. I mean, Scourge was completely right with his words – he didn't and never had owed me anything.

But at the same time... he sure had acted like he did, at least, enough to where his words completely threw me off and continued to make me feel like I had a rock in my stomach. "I guess, but..." I eventually forced out as I looked down at my paws. "I thought you'd care to... spare my feelings a bit more. I..."

I then let out one last long sigh before then standing up, trying to keep my fur flat as I then began to pad away. "Whatever," I then breathed. "Despite that, I respect you enough to listen to you."

Although I could practically feel Scourge's gaze burning into mine, I

didn't hear his pawsteps chasing after me. "Thank you," he then meowed coldly.

With those two words, I paused for a moment, having to screw my eyes shut once again. "Sure," I nearly whispered before padding away once again.

But once again, I came to a stop after a few moments – my heart heavy with hurt, dread and fear at the same time. "You really want me to leave?"

Scourge only answered after a heartbeat had gone by. "Mist, please."

"Well?" I pressed, looking over my shoulder back at the leader.

As I had dreaded, Scourge's expression conveyed nothing to me as he replied. "Literally everything I just said implies that I want you to leave, and I *do* want you to leave."

"Really."

Once again, Scourge took his time to answer. "Yes."

"Geez, well..." I then looked ahead, away from Scourge.

And as my heart then began to pound in my ears, I looked down at my paws and gave the smallest shrug. "I don't want to."

I then looked over my shoulder once again to just barely catch Scourge whip his head over his own shoulder to glance at me. And to be honest, I wasn't sure if it was a true gleam I was seeing in his eye, or simply a reflection from the moonlight above. "Why?" he then asked huskily.

"I..." I stammered as I slowly turned back around to face him, honestly having no idea how to reply. I still hardly believed that I had managed to speak aloud the first part. "I just don't."

"Why, Mist?" Scourge pressed, his voice sharper this time as he also turned to face me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, sighing as I tried to find my words.

My heart was also pounding so loudly that I thought I wouldn't even be able to hear myself speak.

However, I still persevered, somehow. "Is it so bad for me to admit that I haven't liked not seeing you as much for the last half moon?" I meowed hoarsely. "After we've spent... a *lot* of time together?"

"I've been busy!" Scourge retorted.

"Really? I didn't catch that!"

"Come on!"

"Come on is right!" I then exclaimed, my rising irritation also helping me to find my voice. "Listen, Scourge, I understand why you are and the reputation you must uphold and all of the important tasks you must take care of, but..."

Scourge also seemed impatient, his ears flicking as I had trailed off. "But...?"

"But despite all of that, you always seem to make time for me," I tried to meow more confidently, deciding not to bury the lede anymore. "And as much as it makes me want to vomit to say it, I... *enjoyed* that time that we spent together. I..."

I then trailed off once again, practically blinking at myself in surprise. *Why am I even trying?* I then asked myself. *You're only going to hurt yourself more, Mist.*

So, trying to keep that in mind, I closed my eyes, shook my head, and turned away from the BloodClan leader once again. "Forget it," I then meowed coldly. "I said I'd leave you alone."

"Forget that."

This time, I quickly heard Scourge's pawsteps run up to meet me, and I turned around to find Scourge just about a couple of mouse-length's away from me. And as I met his gaze, his eyes were still dark and unreadable, but still managed to blaze and look so intense at the same time. "I still don't understand why all of this is so upsetting for you," he then breathed.

For a moment, all I could do was stare back at the tom as I shook my head. "To be honest? Me neither, Scourge."

I then forced myself to step just a hair closer to him, narrowing my eyes as burned my gaze into his. "I also don't understand why you suddenly want to cut me off like this."

Scourge's gaze slowly began to reflect my own. "Why does it matter?"

I then nearly whispered my next words, refusing to and also not wanting to move a muscle. "Why do you care?"

I then had to keep my fur from rising as Scourge didn't immediately speak once again, simply staring deep into my eyes. And suddenly, that moment that we shared with the torn pillow and the feather felt like *nothing*. And as my heart now seemed to somehow live in both of my ears, lightning seemed to crackle between the two of us like the most intense thunderstorm.

And it felt like a boom of thunder when Scourge finally spoke again. "I think it's about time that we start answering each other's questions," he meowed, his voice low, but taut. Then, with his next words, he spoke slowly, as if he wanted to make sure I fully processed every single one. "Why is not seeing me such a problem to you?"

"I..." I began to answer as I softly shook my head. "I think you'll regret asking that question."

My stomach then seemed to be filled with all of the butterflies and feathers that existed in the world as Scourge then took another step closer to me, and I now felt his breath on my own muzzle as he whispered, "Try me."

Whether or not Scourge would actually be able to handle any answer that I gave him, I still felt as if I should relish in this moment of being able to be so close to him, simply staring into his blue eyes, before finally letting myself acknowledge what I'd known just *days* after finding myself in the Twolegplace.

And that, I did. "Because... typically a cat that... admires another cat a *lot*, and... has strong, weird, disgusting feelings for that cat typically enjoys spending time with them..." I meowed softly, still staring deep into the leader's eyes. "And that cat would be a little disappointed at being shunned all of the sudden by that other cat..."

To my relief, Scourge didn't move, scoff, or shift his gaze away. He simply stared back at me, his blue eyes two flames as he gave the smallest nod. "Makes sense," he then whispered.

"I tried my best to make it make sense," I then muttered before looking down at my paws. "Are you going to shred me to bits now?"

"Come on, Mist. No."

"Really?" I asked, genuinely somewhat surprised as I looked back up at the tom, whose gaze still gleamed. "I would think you could hardly stand to hear something like that from a she-cat. Based on things you've said before... you'd *hate it."*

Scourge then let out a snort and shrugged. "Absolutely. But not..." I then felt my breath hitch as he took yet another step closer to me, and it was more than tempting to lean forward just so my fur could brush his. "Not when..."

For the first time in a while tonight, I finally felt a purr rise in my throat as Scourge then began to hesitate. And although he hadn't said a word, he'd already given me everything that I needed to know. "You know what? Don't bother," I meowed warmly to the tom as I flicked his ear with my tail. "A lot of the things that you've done... at least before tonight, I think show that you return those feelings. At least a little?"

Scourge immediately closed his eyes, letting out a huff before opening his eyes again, revealing a softer but still intense gaze that made me want to sink to the ground. "Was it really that obvious?"

"Shockingly obvious," I then purred, my heart now feeling weightless as I received confirmation for the thing I had wondered about and hoped for for moons now. "Which... which is why you suddenly sending me away was such a surprise, and one reason why

it hurt... a lot."

With another sigh, Scourge broke his gaze from mine and looked off to his side, back towards the city. "Give me a break, okay? Since I've been leader, I've known nothing, but... being a leader, and trying to be a great and powerful one at that," he meowed assertively, his eyes narrowed. "Nothing has ever been there to deter me from that."

"Yeah?" I replied, now settling down next to him as he sat down facing the Twolegplace.

"And even after I met you, I vowed to myself that you wouldn't be that exception," Scourge sighed. He then looked at me briefly, a gleam of mischief in his eyes. "And as much as it makes me want to vomit to say it, that didn't work." I then closed my eyes for a moment as he ran his tail along my flank. "Not at all."

"I see," I whispered as I opened my eyes again. Then, deciding to replicate what I had seen those two weird Twolegs do at the restaurant a few quarter moons ago, I pulled Scourge's tail away from my flank with my own, eventually also intertwining it with mine. "Sorry about that."

And to my complete relief, Scourge didn't pull his tail away, and stared deeply into my eyes once again. "Not your fault," he answered simply. "But at the same time, when this Tigerstar situation came up... after today..."

I then raised my eyebrows with intrigue as he shook his head back at me. "Look, I'm being truthful when I say that nothing at all bad occurred in the forest today."

I then couldn't help but feel a twinge of nerves as I quickly recognized the ominously joyful gleam in his blue eyes, and I really hoped that I was imagining it. "In fact... things are going very, very well, and exactly according to my plan," he eventually went on. "I came back determined to have that as my full focus, but again..."

I then nearly let out a sigh of relief when his gaze slightly softened, and he actually gave a roll of his eyes. "You make that very, very hard, Mist."

I then let out a small purr, giving Scourge another flick on his ear. "So, you really did enjoy all of my snarky comebacks then, huh?"

"Not true. I truly think they gave me the ability to rip concrete to shreds."

"Whatever," I continued to purr, happiness and relief continuing to well up in my heart – but also the smallest bit of dread at the thought that I might wake up at any moment now.

And in this moment, something finally hit me - I suppose I had finally the cat. The tom that Chrissy and Sparrow had promised me that I'd find once I was older and on my own, that support and strong bond that I would have once they were gone. I never thought that I would seek it or find it so soon, and I never thought that it would happen in a place like this or with a tom like this. And I was absolutely terrified and uncertain about where this would lead.

But I was more than ready to take the gamble. It was all I had done since I left the forest all those moons ago. *Why stop now?*

And I also somewhat knew that I was taking a gamble by asking the next question that I did. "So, you can't tell me at all what's been going on between you and Tigerstar? What your plan is?"

And as I had dreaded, that same ominous look wiped over Scourge's eyes once again as he looked out towards the city. "Let's just say that a pretty important deal has been made. One that might result in BloodClan being more prosperous and powerful than it ever has been before."

And as I also stared off at the city, trying with all of my might to simply trust in his plan, I found myself holding back both a purr, and immense nerves as I then felt Scourge lick behind one of my ears, and then press his muzzle into my neck fur. "And if I have to deal with a bit of a distraction amidst all of it, so be it."

Chapter 17

[image]

For a moment I felt that I was trudging through the thickest gust of fog, my head stuffy with nothingness as I very groggily came into consciousness. However, I quickly realized that it was still nighttime considering opening my eyes didn't make much of a difference.

Just based on my slight view of the sky above and the sounds I could hear, I could deduce that dawn was maybe just barely approaching. *Great...*

I slightly stirred in my spot, not being able to move too much with Scourge's tail wrapped around my flank, and his muzzle pressed into my neck. Not that I was complaining... but I was at a standstill.

So, I continued to lie there in our nest, awake, for a few moments, as I tried to decide if I wanted to attempt to go back to sleep or not.

And it didn't take me long at all to decide that I think I wanted some air. As cozy and secluded as Scourge's den at the back of the BloodClan camp was and *had* been, I'd been feeling a little off the past few days anyway, and figured that taking a little walk might help a bit.

So, as quietly and as gently as I could, I tried to shift away from Scourge and stand up – making sure that he wouldn't be startled by the sudden empty space next to him or his own tail suddenly dropping with that empty space.

Then, once I was up on all four paws, I couldn't help but turn back around to look at Scourge, watching as shifted, still asleep, and moved so that he was then lying on his stomach, his head lying in his paws. To me, it looked so uncomfortable, but at the same time, it looked like he was ready to wake up and leap into action at any moment if needed. *He's ready to pelt back into that forest later this morning, I suppose...*

And it was how he had slept for the first few nights since I had moved into the BloodClan leader's den, and while I'd been pretty persistent in lying right next to him, it had taken him a bit to be more comfortable cuddling up to me.

Which, I should have only expected it would be that way.

As I then crept out of Scourge's den, I almost immediately paused, making sure to look back and forth to see if any other cat was out or awake. I had tried to make a very conscious effort to do this every time I left the den, being fully aware that Scourge had been wary about our Clanmates knowing that the two of us now shared a den.

Luckily for Scourge, today, I was leaving the den especially early, and no cat here would be able to suspect a thing.

And with that den now far behind, I decided that I was going to fully leave camp, and let myself mindlessly wander the Twolegplace as the sun began to rise.

I was under the firm belief that this time of day was probably the calmest and quietest that I would ever see the city – there were rarely any Twolegs walking around, and monsters only scarcely passed on the thunderpath. Even most of the bright lights that shone through the tallest buildings were now off, and I was mainly just relying on the tall lampposts scattered about to see what was in front of me.

And it only took me a few moments of padding on the small thunderpath, walking along the countless buildings to realize that this is exactly what I had needed, and I was going to take my sweet time wandering around. At this point, I wasn't worried at all about getting lost – I felt that I had probably explored basically every area that was even somewhat close to the BloodClan camp. *And even if I find somewhere that I haven't been before,* I began to tell myself, *genuinely not scared at all at the prospect of getting lost, I'll figure out my way back.*

For now, I was just going to enjoy my surroundings and let my paws take me wherever they pleased.

And as I continued to pad through the weirdly empty Twolegplace, I found my pawsteps growing lighter and lighter, and my head feeling clearer and clearer as I continued to wake up. *And to add to that, the violent nausea that I woke up with is calming down a bit too...*

Eventually, I found that the colossal buildings that I was now used to were slowly beginning to shrink down, now appearing in the form of what looked like a bunch of Twoleg nests.

As I got to this area, which was quieter than any place I had been in a long time, I found myself taking a deep breath, finding my gaze slowly rising up to the sky, which was slowly turning into a beautiful light purple and pink.

I felt my stomach twist up in the most amazing way possible – I hadn't been able to see much of the sky like this at all in a very long time... it was truly gorgeous.

But my focus was quickly jerked away from that sky, and I shut my eyes tightly as I suddenly felt a strange sensation under my paws.

Though it was something else that I hadn't experienced in the longest while, I immediately knew what it was. *Grass.*

I then let out a sigh as I opened my eyes and looked down, confirming with myself that it indeed was just that. *Well... I said that I would let my paws take me wherever they pleased...* I thought begrudgingly. *Good job, paws.*

I could hardly believe it myself, but I truly didn't think that I had stepped in, let alone *seen* a blade of grass for moons and moons now. And honestly, I couldn't even begin to describe how strange it felt, and the weird feelings that began to surge through my body as I felt it.

If anything, I was *angry*, if I had to pick out an emotion, I had been trying to avoid grass or anything of the sort for the longest time. It only reminds me of...

I then closed my eyes once again, giving my head a violent shake. I can't. I can't think about it...

But almost immediately after that, my eyes opened again and I let out another sigh – but this time, a sigh of absolute longing. *Oh, but at the same time...*

Almost without thinking, I then found myself practically prancing forward and proceeding to let myself sink into the grass, taking in its scent and almost fully engulfing myself into it.

And almost feeling more at home than I had in moons and moons.

And as I continued to lie in the grass, now rolling around in it like a kit, I stopped while I was on my back, realizing with my upside-down view that I seemed to have found my way to a park – a park that I hadn't managed to find before. Small thunderpaths hardly wider than a fox were spread everywhere, with lampposts placed strategically around.

And there were also trees and grass. *Everywhere*.

I also could practically feel my own heart melt as I then realized that I could hear the sounds of the chirping crickets in the shrubs and the early morning birds calling out up in the trees.

And with all of that – these sights and these sounds – I was brought back to the grassy floors of the many places I had explored as a young cat – the plains, the mountains, the cliffs, the rivers, the stones, the forest... I almost *hated* how happy it made me feel to think about all of it... *exploring nature...* nature *and the world around me as I pleased... climbing trees, hunting prey...* I then thought happily as I closed my eyes and continued to lay on my back. *I didn't want to admit to myself then, but goodness, was I jealous of Boulder when he talked about the forest all those days ago...*

I then narrowed my eyes, rolling over so that I was now on my belly. *And yet... I'm here. I put myself here*, I reminded myself. *Living in a camp in between buildings, finding food by stealing from Twolegs... living among vicious outcasts with a double-the-amount vicious – but incredibly powerful and noble – leader...*

I then found myself standing up, my paws now leading me deeper into the park. And when I passed the first tree, I immediately

crouched down, leapt up, climbed up the trunk and then swiftly jumped onto the lowest branch, settling down on its edge.

And once I had, I then took in a sharp inhale and closed my eyes, almost immediately regretting my decision to climb the tree as a beaver dam inside my heart seemed to break, and a river full of sadness began to flow through my body.

So, I violently tried to build that dam back up as I stared ahead at the park, my sight slightly blurry as my eyes filled up with emotion and grief – the grief I had been trying to push down since I first touched the grass. *Would... would Chrissy and Sparrow be happy with this life I was living?* I then asked myself. *Would they be disappointed that this is what I chose to do after I lost them?*

With those questions in my mind, I closed my eyes and let out a frustrated huff... because I honestly couldn't be sure of either of them, and I couldn't be sure about how I felt about that.

But either way, that did not matter.

I gave my head another quick shake. *It doesn't matter,* I told myself once again. *I tried something new. They would be happy about that.*

I then took a deep breath, forcing myself to stay on the tree branch as I then shifted my gaze towards the sunrise – something else that I hadn't had a view of in the longest time. *And after this trip to the park... I absolutely can't come here again. It's too much...*

I then looked back over my shoulder – towards the entrance to the park that led back to the looming Twolegplace. *This life is sufficient for me*, I then told myself. *I'm fitting in in BloodClan, and... I suppose that I have made some pretty notable connections...*

I then shifted in my spot, feeling butterflies flutter in my stomach for just a moment. *It is something, at least. And it is something new.*

I then abruptly closed my eyes once again, practically writhing in pain at on that tree branch as a cramp unlike anything I had ever felt before shot through my stomach.

I then swallowed hard, trying to once again push back that nausea

that had been pestering my for the last few days. *Speaking of something new...* I then thought, nerves making my heart suddenly feel heavy as I lowered my head onto my paws. *Goodness gracious, oh no...*

Chapter 18

[image]

"Are you seriously going for *another* burger?"

I flicked my ears in alarm and turned around at the voice I heard behind me, and I found I was already trying to keep my temper as I met the single amber eye of Fury. "I could've sworn that I saw you eat an entire cheeseburger earlier," she then muttered, her eye narrowing.

I simply stared back at the larger she-cat for a moment, eventually deciding to let the second cheeseburger that was in my jaws fall down to my paws. "You swear correctly," I replied to Fury tautly. "But I wasn't going to eat this one. I was... actually going to..."

I then hoped that I was covering my panic and irritation as I tried to whip up some excuse. "...get rid of it," I then meowed as nonchalantly as I could. "It's smelling a little off, so I thought I'd take it out."

"Okay..." Fury murmured, her expression not changing one bit, to my dismay. "Then why did you drop it as soon as I asked you about it?"

I stared at the tabby dubiously for yet another moment. "...it was heavy?"

With a reply like that, I honestly half expected Fury to drag Scourge from wherever he was in the forest and ask him to kick my thistlefluffed brain out of this Clan.

But instead, she simply stared blankly back at me, eventually letting out a huff and shaking her head. "Whatever," she sighed as she then began to pad away. "Fine, then get rid of it. Hopefully that first burger you ate wasn't bad too."

For a moment, I tried my best to remain in place as I watched Fury

walk out of my sight. However, as soon as she was, I snatched the burger I had dropped right back into my jaws and proceeded to bolt out of the BloodClan camp with everything that I had in me.

And once I was out, I turned left, ran past the building adjacent to the camp, and then turned the corner to ensure that no cat could see me.

I then practically skidded to a stop, crouching down next to a trash can and setting the burger down in front of my paws. *No, Fury, that first burger was not bad at all...*

I then looked down at the burger at my paws as I licked my lips. *And neither is this one...* I thought excitedly before proceeding to fully devour it, probably more ravenously than I'd ever eaten anything in my entire life.

And it felt like only a few heartbeats later that the burger was then completely gone, to me and my stomach's complete sadness. I had never wished more badly that I could go back in time and reexperience anything.

Instead I was lying by that trash can, empty-pawed and still completely amazed by the huge appetite I had been experiencing lately. *Nothing I eat ever feels like enough,* I thought to myself in frustration. *I could eat everything and it would still feel like I've eaten absolutely nothing!*

It was already completely frustrating on its own, but the fact that cats were now beginning to notice made things even worse. *Fury certainly was bold to question my eating choices, but I should only expect so much from these cats I'm living with...* I then told myself. *But goodness, who was she to tell me that it was okay for me to get rid of the burger?*

I then couldn't help but let out a small hiss of frustration as I continued to think about that one-eyed she-cat, who really seemed to think she was in charge when both Scourge and Bone were out of camp. Which, unfortunately, was now happening more and more often.

I didn't think it was possible, but things had seemed to get even more serious with the task in the forest, causing Scourge to make himself scarce more than ever, and causing him to bring Bone with him now every so often.

But despite this, I was all the more clueless and uninformed.

With my annoyingly curious head, of *course* I had tried to get more out of Scourge, but all that the black tom ever did was continue to be so incredibly vague and annoyed that I would even ask. But... simultaneously he was so confident and reassuring that I felt like I didn't need to or shouldn't ask him about it at *all*.

Sure, of course I felt a bit hurt that he for some reason felt that he couldn't give me more information, but I suppose I just had to understand that some of what he did as BloodClan leader was beyond my understanding.

However, I wanted to understand, and I was still crazy curious.

Luckily for Scourge, there truthfully was hardly ever time to press him about it anymore, even if I wanted to. Scourge was leaving our den so early in the day and returning so late at night that it would only leave us a few moments to talk before we both went to sleep, ready to repeat the same routine the next day. As one would expect, this wasn't fun for me, for *several* reasons.

But most of all, what was terrifying and mind-boggling to me was the fact that Scourge still had no idea about the new life that I currently carried in my belly.

I then flicked my ears once again, now practically frozen in my spot as this thought seemed to hit me like a monster – just like it had every time I had thought about it for the last few quarter moons.

And the fact that it made my appetite as large as a Twoleg building certainly wasn't helping matters, I suppose.

I was going to have a kit... or many *kits,* maybe. I was carrying them in my belly right now, and they would eventually have to come out and live in this world, with me as their mother. *And...*

Scourge as their father...

I hated that I couldn't enjoy the thought nearly as much as I wanted to. In fact, for the most part I had felt nothing but fear and terror. I was a fully grown cat, sure, but at the same time, any cat would think that I was young to be a mother. *I'm not ready to be a mother!*

Then, as my thoughts began to dive into even more fear and terror, I forced myself to take a deep breath and give a shake of my head. *But who ever does feel fully ready to be a mother? I'm still going to take care of this kit, or kits, to the best of my ability.*

But with the next thought that came into my head, my anxious thoughts came to the forefront all over again. *But what about Scourge?*

I hadn't told the BloodClan leader partly because I hadn't had the chance to, sure, but also, it was partly by choice simply because I was *terrified* to. I hated to admit it, but I would have been amazed if the tom actually reacted positively.

And with how spotty he had been lately, when would he have time to care for it? *When... when would he actually* want *to care for it?*

I then felt I had to screw my eyes shut as I felt my thoughts begin to spiral all over again and my anxiety give me a stomachache, and without thinking I found that my tail was wrapping around my own belly. *Goodness gracious, is my extra long fur quite the benefit right now...*

I had been genuinely shocked that no cat had directly questioned me about my very swollen stomach. Not that I wanted them to at all, however, with how far along I had calculated that I was, I had prepared for questions this late in the game...

I then let out a long sigh and forced myself to stand up. *But questions or no questions, I have to tell Scourge eventually*, I then told myself, as much as it filled me with dread. *Before it's too late...* No matter how the tom reacted, these kits were his – I unfortunately was very sure of that.

I then closed my eyes, forcing myself to take a deep breath that hopefully wouldn't absorb too many of the stenches from the trash can right beside me. *Okay...* I then said to myself as I tried to center my thoughts. *I will tell Scourge the next time I see him. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it.*

But just a moment later, I found myself having to hold back an anxious whimper. *But my gosh, how is he going to react?*

I then practically felt as if I was in an internal war with myself as I then brought myself to leave the trash can that was next to me, and begin to walk deeper into the Twolegplace, my head held high. *Mist, calm down. You will cross that bridge when you get there.*

I then slightly slowed down my pace, having to lick my lips once again as I realized I could already smell the amazing aroma from the Twoleg meat building up ahead. *For now, I'm going to take a walk and try to find something new to eat!*

I then barred my own teeth, as if to shield my own tongue from coming out again. *For someone else this time*, I then tried to tell myself. *I really do need to stop hogging the food...*

~>~>~>~>~>~

The sun was already low in the sky, pretty much disappeared with the stars beginning to make their appearance by the time I returned to the BloodClan camp – two of what I now knew to be called "hot dogs" stuck between my jaws.

It was honestly so indescribably hard to not eat both of them right then and there. I had been having to tell myself throughout my entire expedition that these catches were not going to be mine to eat.

But my goodness, did I wish that they were. At this point, it had felt like a lot more effort than it was worth to get them... and double the time. This was because, unfortunately for me, I think I was becoming significantly more tired, weak, and... *heavy* with the new weight I was carrying.

But all of that quickly became the least of my worries by the time I walked into camp, my eyes immediately falling on the black pelt and white paws of Scourge, who seemed to be having a word with Bone just a little ways away from our den.

My stomach immediately dropped – luckily not literally – as I realized what the tom's arrival meant.

And as nervous as I was to give him the news that I decided that I would give him earlier today, I also was so, so glad to see him, and honestly wanted to try and make another attempt at trying to get more information from him. *Maybe I can find out what is making it so hard to tell him such vital news...*

And thank goodness, just as I began to pad in that direction, Scourge seemed to end his conversation with Bone, his blue eyes dark as he briefly watched the larger tom pad away to his own sleeping spot.

He was just beginning to turn to pad into our den when I quickly put down my two hot dogs and ran ahead to catch him. "Hey, there!"

I then came to an abrupt halt beside the BloodClan leader, quickly realizing just how out of breath I was just from that small trek and trying to hide it. "Hey, welcome back!"

To my surprise, Scourge looked surprised and alarmed, giving a blink as he stared back at me. "Hey, where have you been?" he asked in bewilderment.

I briefly glanced over my shoulder, flicking my tail towards my two catches that I had managed to snatch from the Twoleg meat place. "I was out getting some more food," I answered the tom before flashing him a confused, but teasing glance. "Am I not allowed to leave?"

Scourge let out a huff at that and gave a roll of his eyes. "That's not what I meant. Come on, Mist," he then groaned.

"Well, good," I muttered before then giving him a flick on the ear

with my tail. "Because I was going to say, you'd really be one to talk!"

"Hey!" Scourge quickly barked back, honestly startling me. "You know that what I'm doing is a lot more important than getting *food*."

I then couldn't help but let out a contemptuous snort, though my tone was still lighthearted as I then meowed, "Well, how do I really know? I still have no idea what exactly you're doing while you're gone!"

But nevertheless, Scourge seemed to give me a hard stare for a few moments after that. "When did this turn into an interrogation?"

I tilted my head to the side, slightly confused. "When you asked me where I have been..."

I then raised my eyebrows, shocked once again, when Scourge broke his gaze away from me and let out a hiss. "Don't be stupid, Mist," he then muttered through gritted teeth. "You're the one trying to mess with me here."

I then couldn't help but let out a taken aback gasp at the tom's words. "By asking you what you're doing in the forest when I *still* don't know?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about!" he then insisted me to, his gaze now sharp and his fur slightly bristled as he looked back at me. "It's being taken care of!"

"Goodness, that's what you always say!" I then replied in complete exasperation. I then forced myself to take a step toward Scourge, my eyes narrowing. "It's *being taken care of* for quite a long time, isn't it?"

Scourge also took a step towards me, and I was able to get a closer look at his blazing blue eyes. "Mist, I've already told you, what I'm *taking* care of could make BloodClan stronger than it's ever been. That should be all of the information that you need."

"Well, it isn't," I barked back at Scourge, deciding to push a little

harder with my questioning this time around. "How hard is it for you to tell me exactly what you and Bone are doing out in the forest? What's actually *happening* that will eventually make BloodClan stronger?"

I then raised my eyebrows as Scourge then gave a shrug, sitting down in front of me. "Maybe I would consider telling you if you didn't act like a burr in my fur every time I came back from doing it!"

I actually very visibly winced at those words, and Scourge's words managed to hurt even more knowing that he could see that they affected me so much. "Whoa, excuse me?" I tried to force out in a tone that was more angry than upset. "I... I thought that was something you were going to try and tolerate."

"Well, sometimes you make that a little difficult," Scourge then replied coldly, with an expression that was just as cold.

And with that, I found that I couldn't speak immediately. Sure, Scourge had definitely berated me every time I tried to speak with him about his intentions in the forest, but this night had definitely been like no other, and it almost left me shaking with confusion, anger and hurt all at once.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that..." I then eventually murmured as I looked down at my paws, not being able to stand looking back at that cold gaze anymore. "Whatever, you don't have to tell me anything, just... stop treating me like a three moon old kit."

I then slightly lifted my gaze, watching as Scourge stood up, his gaze still burning into my head. "I will when you stop acting like one," he then muttered before turning away and beginning to pad towards the den once again.

And I found that all I could do was continue to stand there, my heart feeling hollow and my head swirling with thoughts as the tom brushed past me and out of my peripheral vision. And though my mind was spiraling with these thoughts of hurt and confusion, the camp was deadly silent, and all I could hear were Scourge's pawsteps at his point.

So, I was surprised to say the least when I suddenly heard them stop. "Are you coming in?" I then heard the tom hiss quietly.

Despite the hope that was already beginning to rise in my chest, I didn't look back at him. "What?"

"It's getting late," Scourge whispered again, only a slight edge to his voice. "Aren't you coming into the den?"

I then slightly looked over my shoulder, my eyebrows raised as my eyes fell back on Scourge, who surely enough was waiting right next to our den expectantly. *He really wants me in there right now?*

And as hope continued to rush through my blood, I found myself slowly standing up and trying to pad over as lightly as I could to join Scourge. *I... guess he wants me in there right now.* "Yes, I'm coming in," I whispered back to Scourge as I then crawled through its entrance.

And as I made my way inside, despite how pleased I was that our tiff hadn't left Scourge too angry with me, I tried to tell myself that I was probably going to give the BloodClan leader some space tonight; maybe sleep about a tail-length away from him. If it wasn't obvious already, after how he had reacted to my questioning, I was shocked that he even wanted to be around me right now, and figured that'd be best.

But as I was about to pad around and search for a spot, I let out a gasp as I nearly tripped on something below me. To my complete surprise, I looked down to see another cheeseburger on the floor of Scourge's den, just next to where the two of us usually slept. "Oh, did you get yourself some dinner on the way back from the forest?" I asked Scourge.

I slightly looked over my shoulder back at the tom as he made his own way into the den. "Oh, I got it for the both of us, actually," he answered, causing me to be filled with even more ease.

I then watched as he settled down in front of the burger and lashed his tail towards it. "Have you eaten anything today?"

I followed Scourge's tail, my mouth quickly beginning to water as my eyes fell on the large, scrumptious, delicious-looking burger that was in front of me.

Of course, my truthful answer to Scourge would be that yes, I had eaten *plenty* today – two burgers. Any cat would think that was ridiculous.

Which is why it almost immediately hit me that answering Scourge's question would be the perfect lead into being able to tell him my news... *our* news. *But...*

I quickly was overwhelmed with dread as I came to that realization. I had been dreading it already, but after what had just happened, it all felt even worse. *After the argument we just had, and how mad I made Scourge... I seriously wonder if right now is a good time to give him news like this.*

I then took a deep breath, actually feeling a bit more at ease with this decision. *Clearly, Scourge had another busy day in the forest that left him stressed and irritated. This would likely be the last thing he'd want to hear right now.*

I then let my eyes close for just a moment. *It can wait another day.* "No, I haven't, actually," I finally answered to Scourge. "I'm absolutely starving."

I then let out a sigh, ignoring the guilt that tugged at me as I settled down next to Scourge. The last part wasn't a lie, at least.

And luckily, my guilt only lasted for a moment, and was replaced with even more ease and satisfaction as Scourge then wrapped his tail around my back and pushed the burger towards me – having no idea that this was going to be my third burger of the day.

Chapter 19

[image]

The barely rising sun was trying to burst through the cracks of the den, its light breaking through my eyelids and practically ripping me away from sleep. And as I began to wake up, I could feel my own fur prickling from the cold, empty air.

And as I then blinked the sleep away from my eyes, I saw that Scourge was not beside me. *Shocker*.

And with that realization, I couldn't help but let out a very audible groan and roll onto my back, which was a very comfortable position considering my now very, *very* swollen belly. A very, very swollen belly that at this point was so clearly noticeable that I was shocked that no cat had ever brought it up to me still.

Honestly, at this stage in the game, I almost *wanted* some cat to notice so that I would be given some opportunity to let Scourge know about it, or let the shocking news spread to him. Because, unfortunately, that was still something that I had failed to do even after knowing for *two* moons that I was expecting.

At this point, I was worried that he was going to be finding out the hard way. *Any day now...*

I was hoping with everything in my being that that wouldn't happen, and just the thought of Scourge coming to camp to find me with our new kits or even *giving birth*, managed to make my stomach feel even heavier.

However, there was another thought that made me feel almost just as sick, and that was that Scourge possibly already knew of what was going on, and was choosing to ignoring it.

Unfortunately, that was very plausible, and that made it feel even worse.

I mean, the BloodClan leader would definitely have to be quite a bit dense to at least not suspect. Although we didn't see each other much these days, there had certainly been moments where he brushed his tail along my flank, or wrapped his tail around me... *surely he would notice a difference?* I then asked myself. *Does he really think I'm just fattening up from some extra burgers?*

I then let out a sigh, also very audible, and gave a shake of my head as I continued to stare up at the den roof. And suddenly, I felt more uncomfortable, confused, and scared than I had been in a long time. *I'm supposed to be used to having no idea what to expect. I used to love it. It's how I lived for the first bit of my life, but... right now I despise it more than anything.*

I then let out another huff, pain in my stomach making me wince slightly as I then rolled onto my side. *Goodness gracious, what have I gotten myself into?*

That question seemed to echo and replay over and over in my head as it seemed to intertwine, making me feel worse and worse and sicker and sicker with each time that it did. Why had the universe chosen *right* now for me to expect kits? Why had I waited so long to say anything? Why was I so worried of how Scourge was going to respond? Should I be worried that I'm so worried about that?

And I was only able to pull myself out of my spiral when I quickly realized something.

Outside of the den, it was quiet. Eerily quiet.

Not that it was necessarily typical of any BloodClan cat to get up at the crack of dawn... but at the same time, something felt different.

And for some reason, despite my grogginess, my heavy eyes, my head feeling dull from sleep, and my anxiety and frustration bringing me to want to simply lie down and wallow, I found myself quickly rising from the den floor and bursting out into the BloodClan camp.

And unfortunately, just as I had expected, it practically looked empty. I only could notice a few lingering cats that were still fast

asleep, and Gremlin standing guard by the entrance, but that was it.

And it was at this moment that I came to the conclusion that was Scourge was likely doing a little more out in the forest than just casually corresponding with a wild cat leader – helping him to solve a problem.

Clearly, something much more sinister and strange was going on, and I was going to get to the bottom of it.

And hopefully, within that, I was finally going to tell Scourge that I was expecting kits. No matter how busy he was or how upset he could possibly become with me telling him or even *trying* to tell him, I had no choice.

And I wasn't just going to sit around, mope, and wait for him to come to me. I was going to chase him out in that forest if I had to.

And as I then pelted towards the camp entrance, pushing out any energy that I had despite my weakness, fatigue, and heavy belly, I was more than ready to do that. "Morning, Gremlin," I breathed to the tortoiseshell she-cat, who was staring back at me with wide green eyes. "I'm heading out."

"Right now?" the she-cat immediately asked in shock as she gestured with her tail towards the sky. "The sun is barely up yet."

I shook my head dismissively, also trying to shake away my irritation. "I just need to get some air, while the city is still calm."

Then, as I was about to run forward again, not allowing Gremlin to question me anymore, I let out a frustrated growl when the tortoiseshell intercepted me with her tail. "Mist, should you really be out walking? Have you seen yourself?"

At those words, I paused anyway and whipped my head back around. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on, you know what I mean," Gremlin sighed, her gaze now looking genuinely sympathetic. "You just look so tired and weak."

I then narrowed my eyes as I observed her seem to give a nervous blink, and she began to shift her paws back and forth. "If I didn't know better, I would think that you were..." As I had dreaded, Gremlin immediately noticed me tense up as she trailed off. And suddenly, her green eyes were two large round moons. "Are you actually?"

I felt my fur beginning to bristle as I then felt my stomach drop. *Now someone questions me about it?*

I took a deep breath, trying to force myself to calm down and appear like nothing was wrong... or that Gremlin was wrong in her suspicions. "Don't be silly," I insisted to the she-cat, my voice shaking more than I wanted it to. "I just woke up – I'm tired, and I want to liven up a little by taking a walk. And..."

I then awkwardly gestured to my belly with my tail, which unfortunately Gremlin had already been staring at. "I want to work off some of... *this*, I guess. I've eaten a few more burgers than I typically do..."

"Oh, I know..." Gremlin then muttered, and when I shot her a surprised, confused glance, she gave a quick shake of her head and took a step back. "Whatever. Fine. Enjoy your walk."

Oh, I won't. Thank you, though. I thought to myself, simply giving a sharp nod to Gremlin before quickly trotting into the Twolegplace, my legs already feeling weak with the weight they were having to carry. *This journey had better be worth it...*

I then felt my stomach twist up, the thought hitting me once again that I was forcing myself to travel back to the forest. *For many reasons...*

But as I then pelted through the Twolegplace – the last glows of the lampposts and the lights of monsters simply blurs, and the wind brushing my long fur, I knew at this moment, the stress and burdens I currently were enduring *far* outweighed the pain that being on grass and standing under trees might bring me.

But that didn't mean that I wasn't feeling any pain at all, and that

my stomach wasn't already beginning to well up with discomfort and nerves as I recognized the path that I was on – the same path that I had used to *leave* the forest all those moons ago. The Twoleg nests that had once grown larger and larger were becoming smaller and smaller, and instead of the grass turning into pavement, the pavement was turning into grass.

And eventually, the nests completely disappeared, there was no pavement left...

And there were now dozens of trees towering over my pelt - for some reason, making me feel more weak and overwhelmed than the tallest building in the Twolegplace ever could. Just their presence made me feel so much anger, sadness, guilt... each individual leaf seemed to carry the weight of horrible memories that I had been trying with all of my might to block.

And it was then that it hit me that it was likely that nothing good for me was going to come out of going into this forest. *With how much I had traveled and wandered about these woods after...* I thought, screwing my eyes shut for a moment. *Every part of this place is familiar now, and that's not good...*

I then forced myself to open my eyes again and look up at the darned trees, the rising sun releasing its rays that tried with all of their might to leak through the leaves and branches. *And with that in mind... what am I supposed to do? I-*

I then was ripped away from my thoughts violently, and I let out a hiss as the most uncomfortable cramp surged through my stomach, causing me to have to sink deep into the grass.

And after a few moments of simply trying to take deep breaths through the pain, I let out a moan and rolled onto my back for the second time that day. *Goodness, they get worse every day...* I thought with frustration, taking another moment before heaving myself up back onto my paws and letting out a huff. *Which is exactly why there's no turning back. I can't drag this out much longer, even if I wanted to.*

And then, with one last glance up at the trees, I then began to pelt

into the forest, looking nowhere but forward. *I know exactly what I am supposed to do,* I then thought as determination mixed with an exhilarated fear rushed through my pumping blood. *Buck up, that's what.*

Here was to the end of a beginning. Or... possibly to the beginning of an end. I had to be prepared for both.

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Unfortunately, finding the scent of BloodClan in this forest had been one of the easiest things I had ever done.

I had only seemed to pass through a few clearings and clumps of bramble bushes before I caught the scents of the cats I had come to know so well – Fury, Brick, and Bone... among many others that had left the camp feeling so creepily empty.

And, of course, just as I'd feared, Scourge was among all of these scents as well – he had *led* all of these cats here, I was sure of it.

And I was trying with all of my might to push down feelings of anger and betrayal at the fact that he hadn't told me about *any* of this, and had done *all* of this behind my back. How hard would it be for him to wake me up and at least give a condensed version of what this expedition was about?

How hard would it have been for him to give a condensed version of *any* of this?

Or *anything*?

And as my thoughts begin to spiral once again, I let myself slow down in my travels just a little, giving my head a quick shake. *Come on, Mist, don't be ridiculous*, I then tried to tell myself. *He just doesn't want to worry you. He's trying to protect you.*

After a deep breath, I then broke into a full run once again, my nose now completely leading my path as I continued through the trees. *Be patient. It will all become clear soon.*

At this point, I was certain that most of my energy was coming from

pure determination and adrenaline – my stomach was weighing me down, and my lungs seemed to constantly feel empty despite the deep heaves I was taking. I was shocked that I'd even been able to make it this far. *Maybe I really will burn off those burgers...*

However, as BloodClan's scent became stronger and stronger, finally smelling as fresh as if all of them were standing right in front of me, I let myself collapse onto the ground with one big huff. My stomach and throat were on fire and my head was full of fog as I simply lied there on the forest floor, continuing to try and catch my breath.

My breath then hitched, quickly turning into another pained hiss as another pain shot through my belly. This time, coming in the form of what I now knew to be quite the strong little kick – something that brought me so much fear, pain, and so, so much warmth all at the same time.

And as I continued to gasp for breath, I still managed to roll onto my side and brush my own tail along my stomach. *Hi there, sweetheart.*

Through my shortness of breath and exhaustion, I still managed to give a confused shake of my own head. *Or sweethearts, of course,* I then tried to tell myself as I continued to glance down at my belly. *For some reason my gut is still telling me that there's only one in there. I suppose it's in the family to just have one kit...*

Then, after shutting my eyes and having to fight another wave of grief – that grief feeling as strong as ever as I lied in that grass. *Well, either way...* I then thought as I finally forced myself back on my paws, proceeding to stroke my own belly once again. *Looks like we're in this together, the two of us.*

And after just moments of standing there on my paws, a light breeze just slightly brushing my fur, carrying all sorts of stenches and scents in its path, I knew that I was warm – incredibly warm. Not only was BloodClan's scent still strong, but I also recognized several foreign scents. Scents that had a similar weird twang that Tigerstar had had when he visited our camp.

But for some reason, despite the countless amounts of cats that I

could smell, the wind only brought me hints of only one voice up ahead. And I only had to squint through the bright sun just a little to see the large cluster of trees up ahead that were surrounded by rocks and brambles. *A proper gathering place would definitely be on that other side...*

With a deep breath, I slowly began to pad forward, the grass brushing beneath my paws so frustrating and so comforting all at the same time as I awaited what I might discover just a few fox-lengths in front of me.

And despite the countless amounts of cats I was now sure were not far ahead, the air felt as eerie and tense as the empty BloodClan camp this morning.

"This is Tigerstar's history. It all shows one thing – that he'll do anything for power."

I then flicked my ears, my eyes suddenly wide at the unfamiliar voice that spoke a familiar name.

Trying to be as quiet as I could, I quickened my pace but lightened my pawsteps as I then made my way to the bramble bushes up ahead. And I hoped with everything that none of these cats would catch my scent as I pressed my ear to a bush.

"If he promised you a share of the forest, don't believe him," the strange voice went on. "He won't give up one pawprint, not to you or any cat."

Please don't tell me this cat is speaking to who I think he is.

But unfortunately, given the circumstances and everything I had *managed* to know so far, I knew exactly what I should expect when I finally forced myself to lift my head slightly to peer over the brambles.

But still despite that, I felt like I wanted to fall over when I immediately recognized the black pelt and white paws of Scourge, standing with his crowd of BloodClan cats as he faced Tigerstar, along with several, several cats that I had never seen before. A

flame-colored tom at the front appeared to be the one that had spoken, his green gaze sharp as he stared back at the BloodClan leader.

Scourge was staring back at the tom, his gaze dark and unreadable as they typically were. "Tigerstar told me what he had done with the dogs when he visited me two moons ago," he then muttered, appearing to then glance over at the dark tabby pelt of Tigerstar. "He did not tell me that his plan had failed."

I say "appearing" because for a moment, I couldn't really pay attention to what was in front of me – my head was in a fog all over again.

Dogs. Scourge had said that Tigerstar sent dogs into the forest.

Up until I had seen them, Barley apparently had said that dogs were never around this forest.

But Tigerstar had been the one to lead these dogs into the forest. *He* had laid the bait around to lead them here.

Why? I wasn't sure. But it was likely that the intent was malicious. And the fact that he had supposedly "failed" in this plan didn't matter to me at all. I couldn't have given a mouse's tail about it.

Because, to me, he didn't fail at all.

And with that realization, I felt so sick that I actually found myself having to swallow my own bile, and I had to keep myself from toppling over from how much my legs were shaking beneath me.

This was because I now knew that everything that had happened that horrible, horrible day in the forest could have been completely prevented. *Sure, I could have saved them, but to think that those dogs wouldn't' have been anywhere near us if...*

I then forced myself to give a shake of my head, trying to compose myself despite the immense sadness and rage I was currently feeling. I have to deal with this right now. I can be upset later. I can always be upset later.

"None of that matters now," Tigerstar then barked, fully bringing me to break away from my hurt thoughts. I then was suddenly overcome with nothing but fear as the tom then stepped forward, his fur bristling as he faced Scourge. "We have an agreement with you. Fight beside me now, and you'll have all I offered you."

My legs still slightly shaking, I managed to give the smallest nod of understanding. *And there's the deal that I had to work so hard to hear about. What was so complicated about that?*

And I couldn't help but feel anger begin to rush through my blood once again as my gaze fell on the BloodClan leader once again. "My Clan and I fight when I choose," he then meowed before nodding to the flame-colored tom. "I will think about what you have said. There will be no battle today."

I then raised my eyebrows. *No battle? Scourge says no battle?*

I quickly observed that Tigerstar looked just as bewildered as I was – what was worse, his rage at that statement was clearly visible as his fur bristled and his tail lashed back and forth impatiently.

I then had to hold back a gasp as the tabby tom dropped into a crouch, bunched his muscles, and then proceeded to leap at Scourge with gigantic claws unsheathed. "Traitor!"

Every cat surrounding them, including myself, watched the sight in horror. However, I don't think anyone else was horrified in the same way that I was. Unlike everyone else – I could guess the risk that Tigerstar was taking with that move.

And sure enough, Scourge immediately whipped himself to one side, completely avoiding Tigerstar. But the tabby was barely phased, landing perfectly and facing Scourge once again.

I couldn't help but give the smallest impressed nod. Tigerstar was clearly very strong, very tough, and a very skilled fighter. *But so is Scourge. I haven't seen many other cats fight before, but I don't need to.* He was going to win this fight. I was sure of it.

Scourge continued to support my thoughts, raising a single paw that

revealed his large and sharp claws and then unbalancing Tigerstar with a single slash on the shoulder.

Tigerstar then fell to the ground, and I was already certain that he was going to surrender at any moment now. The fight had ended before it had even started.

So, to say that I was taken-aback when Scourge's claws then went to Tigerstar's throat would be an extreme understatement.

And I then felt as if my jaws had completely dropped to the ground when the black tom then proceeded to take his claws and completely ripped Tigerstar all the way down to the tail.

A move that he had both told me about and shown me, that I had hoped that I would never have to see or use.

But here I was, feeling sick all over again but simultaneously feeling so numb as I watched Scourge watch Tigerstar, looking so cold as the wild cat leader wriggled and let out the most disturbing choking sound that I had ever heard.

It then felt as if only one heartbeat, but simultaneously countless amounts of seasons had gone by as every cat watched in complete silence as Tigerstar tried to fight for his life, and sadly not succeeding. He had been panting, rolling back and forth in pain before finally giving one final jerk and lying completely still.

And with that, the life in his eyes, and the blazing horror and anger suddenly seemed to disappear.

Scourge had killed Tigerstar. Without *hesitation*.

And even now, he didn't look phased despite the horrible act he had just performed. I had always known that he was capable of such things – of *course* he was. He was the most tough, the most ferocious, and the most powerful cat that I had ever known. He was cold, closed-off, and generally not kind. He was mysterious, conniving... manipulative.

And since the day I had met him – I had tried to look past this, and had hoped with everything that he would use his powers for good.

He had appeared to in so many ways. My admiration of that had completely blinded me.

So much that I had let myself be manipulated right to this very spot.

I didn't know how much more I could take to hear or see today.

And I found that I could only back away a few pawsteps, my gaze simply staring at the brambles ahead as I then heard Scourge's voice echo through the forest. "You see what happens to cats who defy BloodClan," he meowed coldly. "Your friend here... thought he could control us. He was wrong."

"We don't want to control you," the ginger tom from before then seemed to force out. "All we want is to lead our lives in peace. We're sorry that Tigerstar brought you here with lies. Please feel free to hunt before you go home."

"Go home?" Scourge retorted, causing me to flinch. "We're not going anywhere, forest fool. In the town where we come from, there is many, many cats, and live prey is scarce. Here in the forest we won't need to depend on Twoleg rubbish for our food."

My legs then were beginning to shake violently once again as Scourge then raised his voice. "We are taking over this territory now. I shall rule the forest as well as the town," he announced proudly as I continued to stare at the ground. "But I understand that you may need some time to reflect on this. You have three days to leave – or meet my Clan in battle. I shall wait for your decision at dawn on the fourth day."

And with that, there was silence. Understandably, the wild cats seemed too bewildered to respond. If they happened to – my head was likely too full to be able to hear it.

But the several pawsteps that then followed for some reason seemed as deafening as the loudest thunderstorm. And as BloodClan's fresh scent brushed through my nose once again, I knew that they were approaching, and that Scourge would proudly be at the front of them – being the first to catch me here in this state.

Of course, a part of me wanted to run away and pretend that none of this had never happened, or simply hide and then figure out what I wanted to do later.

However, it was partly my immense shock, but also for the sake of myself and the kit I was carrying that I decided to stay put when the black pelt of the cat I loved so immensely eventually slithered through the bramble bushes ahead – all of the cats that I had come to know so well following behind him.

And I managed to pull myself out of my blurs of shock and terror just a bit to catch the black tom's completely horrified, enraged expression as his gaze landed on me. "Mist? What in the name of-"

For some reason, just hearing his voice address me in such a condescending, bewildered, and angry manner – a way that he had spoken to me more times that I would have ever liked to admit to myself – I finally cracked like the largest boulder being struck by lightning. "I don't need to hear it," I muttered sharply before the trembling growl in my throat finally spread through my teeth. "I don't need to hear how *you're not supposed to be here* or *you weren't supposed to see that* or *you're now acting like a pesky kit and following me everywhere?* I don't need to hear it."

I then slowly began to step towards Scourge – for some reason, still not afraid of him after all of this time. Even after what I had just seen. Despite my strong defiance and clearly having witnessed his horrible act – there was still a part of me that hoped he didn't want to hurt me. "I'm fully aware that you didn't want to tell me what was going on, and wow... now I see why. Did you really think that I wouldn't eventually find out what you were up to?"

"Well, I guess I should have known," Scourge then hissed, quickly stepping forward towards me, and I tried my best to not take a pawstep back despite the blazing anger in his eyes. "You said it yourself – you really are a pesky kit that just can't help but get into my business. Why didn't you leave it all alone when I told you to?"

"You really think that telling me not to worry is going to appease me forever?" I barked back. "Any cat would be an idiot for taking your word for it. Any cat would look for more information if they

were given so ridiculously little."

I then let out a huff, giving a slow shake of my head as everything continued to sink in. "And thank goodness I am one of those cats," I then meowed, my voice trembling. "I saw you kill a cat and I saw who you really are."

I then blinked a few times and gave a hard swallow. "Who you've been this whole time," I then choked out. "You're sick. You're sick because you killed a cat, and you're sick because you somehow managed to make me believe that you were a cat that I could trust. A cat that I could live with. A cat that I could spend the rest of my life with. A cat that..."

I then trailed off, barring my teeth, letting my gaze fall to the ground and feeling my fur bristle as I suddenly decided to keep myself from speaking. *A cat that I could raise a family with...*

I then looked back up at Scourge, another wave of anger making my fur tingle as I met his unfeeling, cold gaze. *You know what? He doesn't even deserve to know. He doesn't deserve the blessings that this kit would bring him... if he'd even take it at all.*

I then had to hold back a hiss as this thought crossed my mind. *Goodness, the fact that I had worried that he wouldn't be happy... that he would be angry... that says it all right there.* "You're sick..." I then forced out again. "And I'm even sicker for falling for all of your manipulation."

"Mist, do you realize how delusional you sound? Get your head back on the ground will you?" Scourge retorted back at me, actually causing me to flinch amidst my constant shaking. "You're right – you are sick, wandering around the forest like an idiot and trying to poke into my business! I told you that I was taking care of things here in the forest and you never believe me!"

And with Scourge's harsh words, I couldn't help but feel the smallest twinge of remorse. "I know, I know – I'm sorry. I was going to mind my business in camp today, but-"

I then realized what I was saying, and gave a violent shake of my

own head. "No!" I then yowled, trying to pull myself out of that trap of a mindset I'd been in for so long. "Clearly, everything that I did was with good reason, and *you're* an idiot if you think that it wouldn't lead to this."

And when Scourge didn't immediately speak, I gave a somewhat mischievous glance to all of his Clanmates behind him before taking another step towards the BloodClan leader. "I hope you realize that part of this – all of this - is your fault, Scourge. You let me into your life, were vulnerable with me – I *thought* – and made me believe that I was somebody incredibly special to you. Of course I would eventually come after you and see what you were up to."

And with these words, I actually did wonder if I should fear for my life for a moment as Scourge's eyes then seemed to flash with complete bewilderment and rage – bewilderment and rage at what I had just decided to reveal to the whole Clan. *Another reason why all of this is a load of foxdung – you were too ashamed to declare our relationship to anyone*.

"And that is why, Mist, I should have known that associating myself with you would be nothing but a *nuisance*," he then muttered sharply and angrily to me through gritted teeth. "And you know what? I tried to push you away, and you didn't listen to me. You just *couldn't* leave me alone that night on that building."

"You didn't send me away when I said so!" I then barked back to Scourge. "You cracked, Scourge. You gave in – admit it."

"I sure did – like a complete fool!" He then narrowed his eyes, leaning his head creepily close to mine. "I think I'm starting to realize that that distraction wasn't worth it at all."

Despite Scourge's words practically scratching me from my throat to my tail, just as Scourge had just done to Tigerstar, I stood my ground and didn't avert my gaze from the BloodClan leader. "Fair enough," I forced out as evenly as I could.

I then narrowed my eyes as I continued to stare back at the tom. "I think I'm starting to realize that I should have left that night, and not even bothered."

With those words, Scourge simply stared back at me, his eyes still blazing, before muttering, "Well, it's about time."

And with that, he gave a single gesture of his tail to his cats behind him before beginning to pad past me, his black fur slightly brushing mine as he then led his cats away.

And as the rest of them passed, I could feel all of their shocked, worried glances burning into my pelt, but I didn't meet any of them. I simply stared at the place that Scourge had been until the last of their pawsteps disappeared from my earshot.

And something about that sound made me realize that I had reached my breaking point. And suddenly, anything and everything became a blur around me once again as I then collapsed to the ground, my stomach and head now practically throbbing with pain as I violently whimpered into my paws – releasing all of the sadness, confusion, anger, rage, and most of all grief, that I had tried to push down for moons and moons.

Finally, I let go of the numbness that I had been living on for moons and moons

The numbness that had made me determined to forget everything about my past and try to move on. That had brought me to cling to the first cat that I found and be blinded by their power and strength.

That had caused me to never fully process the death of my parents. The death of my parents that I now knew could have been *completely* prevented.

I had tried to forget them and every aspect of the lives we had lived simply because losing both of those things hurt too much.

And right now, it honestly hurt more and felt worse than it ever had. I was so overwhelmed with that rage, sadness, and grief that I almost felt like I wasn't apart of my own body. My head was spinning, and my eyes stung from how much I was whimpering.

But at the same time, I hadn't felt this relieved or free in such a long

time.

And maybe the little life... or lives in my stomach somehow sensed this. Or maybe it was as simple as them being alarmed by all of the emotions that their mother was suddenly feeling... but it only took another little violent kick, me losing my breath, and a few more stomach cramps for me to realize what was about to happen.

And I then couldn't help but let out a pained screech as the most physically painful pang that I had ever felt shot through my side. *Oh, no... no, no, no, not right now!*

And then, the pains that had started just at my stomach quickly began to spread throughout my entire body, and suddenly, trying to keep my breathing steady was the only thing I could focus on. *Stay calm, Mist*, I then tried to tell myself. *All you can do is stay calm when you have no choice but to deliver your own kit by yourself.*

But my own words to myself quickly were shoved to the back of my mind as the pain rapidly grew worse, my breaths became shallower, and my body became weaker and weaker. *No...* I thought as I began to well up with fear. *Oh, goodness, no...*

"Yes, that's right. Just keep breathing."

I was too weak to flinch at the new voice I heard, or the quick pawsteps running towards me. I couldn't even let out a growl when I then felt a paw begin to stroke my belly. "You are doing so well. Just try to keep breathing and I will do the rest."

My vision now blurry, I tried with all of my might to peer over at this strange cat – who smelled and sounded completely unfamiliar to me. "W-who are you?" is all I managed to croak out.

And as my eyes landed on the figure next to me, I was able to make out a smaller gray pelt and a slim outline, with ears that appeared to be pricked and alert

And I also could just barely make out the stranger's warm, calming blue eyes that stared down at me as if it was her life's duty to simply make sure I was okay. "My name is Cinderpelt," the

mysterious she-cat then meowed warmly. "Don't worry, you can trust me, I promise. I heard your yowl from just a little ways away, and now, I just want to help you deliver your kits."

Chapter 20

[image]

After all that I had been through today, and after all that I had discovered, for some reason, encountering a cat that I had never seen before brought me to be quite territorial. "Really? I can trust you?" I retorted, slightly shifting away from this *Cinderpelt*. "How on earth am I supposed to take your word for it?"

The gray she-cat sighed, and I found myself trying to focus on her distressed blue gaze to distract from my discomfort and pain. "In your current condition, I'm not sure if you have much of a choice."

I let out a slight hiss as a pain shot through my side, causing my next words to come out in more of a growl. "What do you mean? Of course I do!"

This time, I couldn't bring myself to move again as Cinderpelt took another pawstep towards me. "Okay, let's put it this way – if that was the case, the worst that could happen is that I ultimately *don't* help you deliver your kits," she replied, her gaze growing sharper, "which is what will happen for *certain* if you continue to turn me away."

Truly trying to absorb the she-cat's words, I found that I could only stare at her warily for a few moments as I tried to breath through my pain. *All of the dreams I've ever had in my life have made more sense than this day,* I couldn't help but think. *I watched my mate kill a cat that I thought was his ally, very likely split with him, and now I have a stranger appearing to help me give birth.* "But I still have no idea who you are," I finally forced out. "How can I at least trust that you know what you're doing?"

"I'm sorry to use this phrase again, but *trust me*, I know what I'm doing," Cinderpelt immediately replied, her eyes now wider with urgency. "Healing and taking care of other cats is what I do."

Before I could even open my mouth to question the she-cat, she

shook her head and sat down right next to my flank. "I really wish that I could elaborate, but there isn't time," she then meowed quickly. "Will you – what's your name?"

I simply let out a sigh, finally deciding to give in to the she-cat. *Honestly, any scenario that might happen here will still likely be better that what I've already experienced today...* "Mist," I answered simply.

"Mist, will you please take a chance on me?" Cinderpelt then insisted, her eyes still gleaming with concern. "I don't know what I'd do with myself if I left you here to struggle on your own."

And after those words, it only took me a moment to observe that genuine care and sympathy that was glowing in Cinderpelt's blue eyes. And if somehow she was faking it, she was a pretty gosh-darn talented cat, and a very horrible one too.

But at this point, I could only trust that was all genuine, and I suddenly was very tempted to cling onto the she-cat's kindness. "Okay," I then breathed. "What do I need to do?"

Further reassuring me, Cinderpelt let out a quick, relieved huff. "Alright," she then sighed as she then put one of her paws on my belly. "It looks like the first kit is fast approaching. All I need you to do is push when I ask you to."

And it was at this moment – now that my fear of stranger danger was past – that the situation at hand finally hit me. I was about to give birth. I was about to bring kits into the world. I was about to become a mother.

And despite all of the physical pain I was going through, I still managed to feel the weirdness as my stomach seemed to twist up into a nervous knot. "...Okay," was all I was able to give Cinderpelt in response.

Seeming to sense my sudden apprehension, I felt Cinderpelt give a gentle stroke of my belly with her paw. "It's going to be okay, I promise," she then meowed soothingly. I then watched curiously as she looked from side to side, before then padding a little ways away and then returning with a stick in her jaws and setting it down

beside her. "Now, this is going to hurt. Is this your first time doing this?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, giving a hesitant nod. "Yes, it is."

Cinderpelt's eyes briefly flashed with sympathy once again. "I figured – you look so young..." I was then surprised to observe the immense fear beginning to glow in her eyes, but before I could ask about it, she shook her head once again and then lashed her tail towards the object in front of her. "Do you need a stick to bite on? It doesn't make the pain any better, but it sure makes it easier to get through."

I managed to give a stiff shrug and let out a weak purr. "Might as well prepare for the worst of the worst, right?"

Cinderpelt also managed to let out a small purr, and she then picked up the stick once again and let me grab hold of it in my own jaws. And almost as if on cue, as soon as my teeth seemed to meet with bark, I felt so much discomfort and pain run through my stomach all at once, bringing me to want to bite down on the stick like my life depended on it. *Cinderpelt is right,* I thought*, this certainly doesn't relieve any pain...* but something about being able to sink my teeth into the object allowed me to somewhat focus on something else, and to bring my tension elsewhere.

And thank goodness I had this stick, because I truly didn't think that I had ever felt so much pain all at once. "My gosh, is it really supposed to hurt this much?" I forced out through my full mouth.

"It does when your kits want to come out as quickly as they are," Cinderpelt meowed, her gaze concentrated on my belly, but her paw still stroking it comfortingly. "Are you ready to push, Mist?"

As this reality hit me all over again, I had to take a moment to close my eyes and take a deep breath. "I think it would be to my detriment to say no."

Cinderpelt managed to give another purr and a nod. "Absolutely!" she then exclaimed before flashing me a brief reassuring look. "Then go on – and remember to breath."

Holy hot dogs with a hemorrhage, here we go.

Even though I wanted more than anything to somehow run away in fear, I took another deep breath and then did as I was told, beginning to push and already bracing myself for even more pain.

That came immediately.

And suddenly, I was so thankful that I actually had another cat here with me – not to mention one that claimed to have experience with this, however that was possible. I would have had no idea what to do in this moment, with the pain completely fogging my common sense or sense of judgment.

All that I could think about right now was how much pain I was in, and also the fact that I was about to have a kit. My own kit.

And as Cinderpelt kept urging me and encouraging me to keep pushing, I was suddenly filled with a new determination as I continued to do so. I was sure that the pain was getting worse now, but it didn't matter to me anymore.

"Mist, you are doing so well," Cinderpelt meowed enthusiastically, further pushing me on. "Keep going – you are so close!"

And with that, I gave the biggest push that I could muster up, followed by the largest amount of physical pain I was certain that I would ever feel.

But then, the biggest amount of relief followed. And once again, I felt – and also somewhat hoped – that this was the only one.

And within just a heartbeat, I felt my own heart melt as Cinderpelt then bent her head sown, settling down a little bundle right down in front of me. "And that's one – the only one, Mist," the she-cat then meowed softly, confirming my gut feeling. "You did it."

For several moments, I couldn't even speak, and I actually felt as if my soul would leave my own body with how overwhelmed I was with happiness, and so, so much love. "Oh my goodness..." I whispered, wanting to do nothing but just stare down at the little scrap forever. But instinctively, I knew that I had to lick it out of its

sack.

Cinderpelt watched happily as I did so, for some reason looking just as relieved as I was. And after she gave my kit a sniff, she gave a sharp nod and murmured, "It's a little she-cat!"

A daughter. My daughter. "And she's perfect," I then breathed as I watched her squirm in her spot and let out little mews. "She..."

I somehow managed to observe my new kit even harder, and also somehow managed to feel even more overwhelmed as I looked down her brown tabby and white fur. *She's more than perfect...* "She..." I tried again, my voice thick with emotion. "She looks almost just like my mother."

I then slightly averted my gaze as Cinderpelt settled down beside me, just having come from a nearby bush. "She must have been absolutely beautiful then." I then flicked my ears in surprise as the gray she-cat then lifted up one of her paws, revealing a few leaves. "Here."

I first gave a slow nod, trying to push back the emotion welling up in my eyes, but nevertheless letting the grief I was feeling fully encapsule me – something I had never let myself do. "Oh, she was," I replied regarding Cinderpelt's observation. *And if this kit becomes half of who Chrissy was, then I will feel like I've succeeded as a mother.*

I then nodded to the leaves that Cinderpelt held in her paw. "What are these?"

"Borage leaves," Cinderpelt answered. "They'll make sure that your kit has enough milk to keep her healthy and strong. It looks like you're just fine for now, but just to be certain."

Hopefully not poison... I told myself, trying to lean onto the fact that Cinderpelt was *that* experienced that she knew what remedies I needed, as I licked up all of the leaves. "Thank goodness," I meowed through my full mouth.

I then tilted my head, filled with curiosity all over again as I noticed Cinderpelt give a nod, and let out what sounded like a long,

exhausted sigh of relief. "Why do you seem more relieved than I am?" I asked with humor in my voice. "Did I actually have reason to question you before, and you actually have no experience and you just got lucky?"

Cinderpelt managed to let out a purr of amusement. "Oh goodness, no! I wasn't lying to you at all! I just..." She then let out another sigh. "I'm just so thankful that I got the opportunity to do this right."

I then flashed the she-cat a confused, concerned look that brought her to further explain. "I've helped a she-cat give birth in the past, when I was younger, and... I lost her," she then meowed solemnly, her eyes revealing the heaviness that she still carried in her heart. "Trust me, I've received so much more training since then, and have learned so much and learned that... you can't save everyone no matter how much you try, but..."

She then gave a shake of her head, and met my gaze warmly. "Thank you, Mist, for giving me a chance to try again." She then let out another purr, giving me the lightest nudge with her tail. "This is probably a lot to hear from a complete stranger."

I shook my head quickly, immediately giving reassurance to the she-cat as affection welled up inside of me. "That's okay! I'd say that a cat that helps me deliver my kit at least is upgraded from a stranger to an acquaintance."

I then let out a purr myself as I recalled something that Cinderpelt had just said. "And you're thanking *me*? My goodness, thank *you*, Cinderpelt." I then looked down to see my kit making its way to my belly, then proceeding to begin suckling. "I truly could not have done that without you, seriously. And..."

I then lightly put the tip of my tail on Cinderpelt's shoulder. "I'm sorry about what happened. I'm glad that I could give you that redemption you were looking for."

Cinderpelt gave a single nod, her gaze still incredibly kind and full of relief. "You sure did. A healthy and happy new mother with a healthy and happy new kit is more than I could have asked for." Then, after the two of us exchanged a warm look, Cinderpelt

nodded down to my daughter. "What are you thinking of naming her?"

I then blinked in surprise – realizing that that was a question I had never even asked myself up until this point. *I never could...* I then thought as I felt a pang of bitterness. *That was probably the last thing on my mind, when all I was worried about was telling Scourge about the fact that I was expecting, and never being able to tell him.*

I then had to push back regret as I realized something else. *Will he ever know that he has a daughter?*

I then quickly pushed away that thought. *It doesn't matter. He doesn't deserve to know,* I then told myself. *I will see this kit as my own, and only my own. It's what's best for me, and what's best for her too.*

I then shook my head, bringing myself back and answering Cinderpelt's question, the excitement of it distracting me from all of the frustration that had been built up for the past couple of moons. "Hm... for some reason I feel like I should wait until she opens her eyes," I answered, that being the first thing that came to mind. "Is that weird?"

"Not at all!" Cinderpelt insisted. "I've heard of and seen several mothers that do that, or even wait to see how their kits act before they give them a name."

Interesting. "Sounds like a plan then!" I replied enthusiastically as curiosity came to the forefront once again. I then looked lovingly down at my kit, simply so happy to have her and to be with her, whatever her name would end up being. "Speaking of which, where is this place that you supposedly heal and see 'several mothers'?"

I then flicked my ears, as a potential answer to the question I was about to ask came to mind, slightly exciting me. "Where are you from?"

"Cinderpelt?"

I then nearly let out a gasp, just now being able to process the several pawsteps and several unfamiliar scents that began to flood

into my nose. *Oh, no...* Out of instinct and protection, I quickly stood up and took my kit into my jaws.

Beside me, Cinderpelt also stood up urgently. "Yeah, about that..." she muttered before stepping over to flank me. "Firestar, over here!"

Firestar?

I then could only watch, incredibly curious and nervous as these new scents became as strong as ever, and the pawsteps become as close as ever. Just heartbeats later, the crowd of cats were in sight – *and* a sight to behold. I immediately recognized the flame-colored tom that emerged first, and I could only assume that this was the "Firestar" that Cinderpelt had called out to. Behind him, several cats emerged, who I also somewhat recognized from just earlier.

These were the same cats that had just confronted Scourge and the rest of BloodClan, and who had also just witnessed him brutally kill Tigerstar along with me.

These were the cats that lived together in this forest – the forest that Scourge was now threatening to take over.

These were wild cats. *Oh my goodness...*

As I came to this realization, I couldn't help but glance over at Cinderpelt, somewhat in shock, as I put together that this was where she was likely from as well – these wild cats that Barley had spoken so well of; ones that he was even *acquainted* with and that were so kind.

Well, so far, *one* of them had been incredibly kind. I had no idea how this crowd of cats would react to this stranger holding a newborn kit in her mouth. And when they found out where I was from... I couldn't even being to imagine what that would bring...

Just take it one pawstep at a time, I then tried to tell myself, and I then tried my best to stay calm and simply focus on my kit's sweet mews as Firestar and his cats continue to come forward.

As I had expected, his green eyes were set on me – narrowed and wary, but more curious and concerned than anything. "Hm, is this

the source of the yowling you were looking for, Cinderpelt?"

Cinderpelt gave the tom a sharp nod. "Yes, it is."

To my surprise, I looked back at the leader to find his gaze continuing to grow with concern. "And is everything okay?"

Cinderpelt once again let out a relieved sigh, giving another nod to the ginger tom. "More than okay, actually." I then flicked my ears with intrigue as the two then seemed to exchange a knowing look, and a warm, proud look briefly seemed to flash on Firestar's face.

But I then had to keep myself from stepping back as a fluffy white tom quickly emerged through the crowd to stand in front. "Things aren't *more than okay* when strangers continue to linger on our territory!" he nearly growled, staring with narrowed blue eyes back at me. "Who is she, Cinderpelt? One of those BloodClan cats?"

I hated that my flinch was probably very visible in response to that question, and I also felt my fur beginning to raise as I then felt Cinderpelt's blue gaze burn into me, among many others. "This is Mist," she answered the tom. "And to be honest, I'm not too sure, Cloudtail."

To my relief, despite Cinderpelt's words, her eyes revealed a trusting gaze with only a little bit of wariness. I could tell that the gray she-cat knew that I was from BloodClan – I surely smelled like it, and just from how nervous I had appeared with Cloudtail's question, that certainly was enough to give it away.

However, despite any of that, I appreciated that Cinderpelt was going to let that information come straight from the horse's mouth. But I was still terrified of how these cats would take it, especially with what they had just gone through with BloodClan.

So, with that in mind, I hoped that if they wanted to rip a cat to shreds, that it would just be me and not my kit. "I..." *Wait...*

I then quickly trailed off of my words, having to take another moment to think as I realized that... *am I even a BloodClan cat anymore?*

After everything that had just happened, I was certain that I never wanted to return to that camp ever again. At least, not *anytime* soon. The fact that Scourge had done something so horrible was bad enough, but the fact that the rest of the Clan had simply stood behind him and let it happen, let *all* of it happen, was more than enough for me. That community – or *whatever* they were – wasn't one I wanted to be a part of, and that wasn't a place that I wanted to be. *And it isn't the place where I want my kit to grow up... I don't know where it will be, but absolutely anything else would be better.*

Any place would be better, because I never wanted to return to BloodClan again.

And with that decision made, I set my kit at my paws and tried to stand more confidently. "I... I was," I finally answered. "I'm not anymore."

And as I had expected, there was still an uproar despite the "was".

"That's what they all say!" a dusty brown tom nearly shouted off to the side.

"This has to be a joke!" the cat who I now knew to be Cloudtail then retorted.

I then watched as Firestar simply closed his eyes and lifted up his tail. "Hold on..."

"Firestar, do you not think that she is a spy for BloodClan?" a gray speckled tom then added in.

I then blinked as another long-furred white tom, this one looking a bit older, flashed the gray tom a narrowed gaze. "Maybe if we let her speak more than a few words, we'd find out."

Firestar then seemed to flash the white tom a grateful look, and without any word, intently looked back at me.

And to my surprise, this also silenced all of the other complaining voices. The only thing I heard was a small grunt from the dusty brown tom. "Hm. Choose your words wisely," he then muttered quietly.

Uh, oh. I guess I get to speak more... And after another nervous look at Cinderpelt, I took a deep breath and tried to find the right words, also trying to find the courage and confidence that I'd had when I first went into the Twolegplace all those moons ago. "I've lived in BloodClan in the Twolegplace for moons now, but I wasn't born there."

I then let out a quiet snort. "And thank goodness, otherwise, I think leaving would have made things even harder..."

"Still seems like a likely story..." I then heard the dusty tom mutter again.

"Dustpelt..." Firestar then sighed, flashing the tom an irritated look.

"Firestar, come on!" Cloudtail then demanded. "What reason do you have to trust her? We need to send her away!"

To my surprise, beside me, Cinderpelt then let out an appalled gasp. "No!" she nearly cried out. "Do you not see the newborn kit at her paws?"

I then flicked my gaze towards the gray-speckled tom as I heard him let out a sigh. "I hate to admit it, but I think that Scourge would be sick enough to guilt us with a kit."

With that, Cinderpelt simply let out a sigh, flicked her tail dismissively, and took a step forwards towards Firestar, who I assumed to be this group's leader with how much they were addressing him. "Firestar, for once, I think you shouldn't listen to your Clanmates," Cinderpelt insisted. She then scanned her gaze around the crowd of cats. "If Scourge really did have a plan to bring this spy in with a kit *this* young, he would have had to come up with the plan... *right* now."

Then, after a few more hisses in retort, the she-cat went on. "I just helped her give birth! What she needs right now is rest and shelter!" She then looked back at Firestar, her gaze practically pleading. "Would she be able to return to camp with us?"

I then couldn't help but cringe as the hisses became even louder. I

almost couldn't even think about the fact that Cinderpelt had just invited me to stay with the wild cats – the wild cats that I had wondered about and had thought about for so long.

And I still wouldn't have a lot of time to think about it. "Cinderpelt, now is not the time to bring in an extra cat!" Dustpelt then barked. "Let alone a cat that might get us into more trouble than we already are!"

"Exactly!" a dusky-brown she-cat then called out in agreement. "How in the name of StarClan are we supposed to trust her?"

I then felt my stomach twist up into a knot once again as Firestar once again let out a sigh and closed his eyes. "I suppose that we can't know for sure..."

I then blinked as I watched a pretty light ginger she-cat make her way to the front to stand next to Firestar. "I don't want a potentially dangerous cat in our camp more than any of you, but..." She then gestured towards me with her tail. "This is no doubt a young she-cat that has just given birth, and that is no doubt a kit that has just been born, and they both need to go somewhere that is safe and where they can be cared for."

A long-furred gray tom then came forward to stand on Firestar's other side. "I agree, Firestar. I'd hate to send her away like this." I then raised my eyebrows as he flashed me a quick, narrowed glance. "Although, I am wary..."

Firestar seemed to fully absorb the words of both of his companions, his green eyes dark and deep in thought as he gave a slow nod. Then, after a few moments that felt like a few moons, he finally looked back at me. "You say that you've left BloodClan?"

"Thankfully," I replied, giving a shy shrug.

"When did this happen?"

I then let out a sniff, continuing to decide to tell the truth to these cats despite how outrageous or shady it would likely sound. "Actually, funny enough, as of a few moments before this kit was

born – when I saw... what Scourge did."

I then found myself having to take a deep breath. "Does that now affect if you're sending me away or not?"

I then shut my mouth, keeping myself from speaking once again as I realized that what I had been about to say next was very, very dangerous information. *But at the same time...* I then thought to myself, *hiding this information and then having it revealed later would look just as bad...*

I then let out another sigh, deciding that I was going to let the cat out of the bag – these cats might as well find out now. And what did I have to lose? "And does that fact that I was Scourge's mate make it any worse?"

And with that, the cats reacted as if someone had just told them that they were losing their forest. *Wait...*

"It should!" Cloudtail then growled.

"That fleabag was able to love?" the gray-speckled tom then asked in disgust.

"That doesn't matter!" Dustpelt then retorted, lashing his tail towards me and my daughter. "Of course a mate of Scourge's would try to worm her way in like this! Is that kit his?"

"And *that* matters?" the light ginger she-cat then called back.

"Quiet!" Firestar then yowled out. He then sighed and closed his eyes once again. "Please."

Then, after a moment, he opened his eyes and let them flit around at his cats. "Listen, as much as I want to be cautious, I would hate to assume that this is simply a cat out to get us, when it genuinely could be a she-cat that needs our help."

He then nodded to the light ginger she-cat next to him. "Whether or not this she-cat brings trouble, Sandstorm is right – if there's anything we need to give attention to, is that *that* is a newborn kit lying right there. It is our duty to care for a kit no matter where

they come from."

And with that, both me and Cinderpelt let out sighs of relief, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude and disbelief. "Thank you, Firestar," Cinderpelt breathed.

"Yes, thank you," I then immediately meowed. I then looked down at my kit and at my paws for just a moment before meeting the leader's gaze with solemn eyes. "And... whether or not you take it sincerely... I apologize. I really, really apologize on behalf of BloodClan. I hate that you've been put in this position."

"Something that a master manipulator would say..." Dustpelt then muttered.

Firestar quickly shot his gaze back towards the tom. "Hey..." he meowed to him before returning his gaze to me. "Thank you, Mist," he then said to me as he began to pad ahead and lead his group through the forest. "Yes, you are certainly coming into our Clan during a very interesting time. I sincerely hope that your visit won't be something that makes it more interesting?"

I eagerly nodded back to Firestar. "I promise," I answered genuinely. "Thank you, again."

"Of course," Firestar then meowed a bit more confidently, the sun falling down on his pelt and making his fur look very true to his name. "ThunderClan welcomes you."

I gave a slow blink as I simply stared back at the tom for a moment. *ThunderClan... I love that.* Just the name sent a chill down my spine, and somehow filled me with pride.

I was then pulled out of my thoughts, letting out a purr as Firestar looked behind him and flashed a few of his Clanmates a contemptuous look. "Whether they want to admit it or not..." I then watched as he nodded to Sandstorm, who was still next to him. "Do you mind helping Cinderpelt bring Mist back to camp?"

And with that, Sandstorm nodded and quickly trotted up to my side. And as the two she-cats watched me pick up my kit and then

began to lead me forward behind the rest of the crowd, it hit me once again as I looked at all of them that these were *wild cats* – the group of cats that had lingered in my mind for so long, and the cats that I had been so curious about since I was just a few moons old. With that in mind, I couldn't help but let out a small purr despite many cats in front of me looking over their shoulders and giving me wary or dirty looks.

And next to me, Cinderpelt was still looking incredibly thrilled and relieved, but wariness had still remained in her eyes throughout the entire confrontation. "Alright, Mist, now it's your turn," the she-cat then leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Can I trust you?"

I also leaned over and whispered back. "In my current condition, I'm not sure you have much of a choice." After the two of us exchanged a quiet purr of amusement, I went on. "Yes, you can trust me. I hate that I had to be betrayed by Scourge and BloodClan to realize that I didn't belong there, but nevertheless, here we are."

I then let out a sigh as I simply stared ahead. "I'm never going back there. And right now, all I want is for my kit to be safe."

"I'll take it," Cinderpelt replied warmly. She then lightly touched her nose to my brown tabby and white daughter that was still in my jaws. "And I'll make sure of that. We'll all make sure of that."

Suddenly being filled with amazement, I gave Cinderpelt the slightest nod. "Thank you..."

And then, as we continued through the forest, I found that I was somehow feeling more content and free than I had in a very, very long time, despite the hurt, grief, and betrayal that I still felt after the events of today. *But I suppose that giving birth to the most wonderful kit in the world, and being shown some kindness really could turn things around...*

And as I looked around at the cats that had shown me this kindness, I had to admit to myself that they had all the right to be wary of me, and I hoped that they would soon be able to trust me.

And as much as I also hated to admit it, I still didn't trust *them* fully.

Sure, they clearly were on the opposite side of BloodClan and were the victims of this situation, they were still completely unfamiliar to me, and *so* different from anything that I had ever known.

But whatever the case, I felt that I had no choice but to cling to the little ounce of compassion that they were already showing me.

Chapter 21

[image]

I found myself growing more and more tired, finally feeling like I had a chance to relax as I traveled through the oak forest surrounded by strangers. And likely, the adrenaline of facing so many new cats had likely given me some weird form of strength in order to stand. But, as I slowly but surely adjusted to this new situation, and as the postpartum symptoms began to worsen, I almost wanted to ask Sandstorm or Cinderpelt to step away so that I could simply collapse onto the ground.

But that surely wouldn't be the best first impression, even with them knowing very well that I had just given birth. Also, there was no way that I was going to move any unnecessary muscle with my new kit in my mouth.

So, I attempted to stay strong and fully just give into the help that these two she-cats were giving me, trying to focus on the sweet mewls of my daughter as she dangled from my jaws.

And as I should have expected, Cinderpelt quickly noticed when I leaned just a bit more into her. "Are you alright?"

On my other side, I heard Sandstorm let out a sniff. "An interesting question to ask a she-cat who has just giving birth."

Cinderpelt then let out what sounded like a very taut purr. "I suppose so," she then muttered. Weirdly, with those words, it suddenly felt like I could cut the tension with one of Scourge's sharp claws, but it vanished as quickly as it had come. "Well?" the gray she-cat then prompted me.

I let out a deep sigh and gave a small shrug. "I have to admit, I am extremely tired..." I breathed in reply, trying my best to speak with a literal living thing in my mouth.

"Well, no worries – we'll be arriving to our camp at any moment

now." Cinderpelt then purred, giving my sweet kit the lightest nudge with her nose. "You and your little one will be able to get plenty of rest."

"Thank you, really," I then meowed after another sigh, not being able to feel another rush of excitement with Cinderpelt's words. There was something about this new adventure and traveling to this new place that was so, so exciting for me. *I haven't felt this way or experienced this feeling in such a long time... but it is one of the most amazing feelings, and I've missed it.* "Where is your camp? What does it look like?"

"Oh, it's wonderful – a big ravine," Sandstorm replied. This immediately piqued my interest with all of the amazing ravines I'd gotten to see and stay in before. "It's just right for all of us, and it's surrounded by so many trees."

"Some cats in other Clans hiss at the thought of living in a place like it, but we like it just fine!" Cinderpelt then put in. She then gently flicked my kit's ear with her tail. "And everyone here will make sure that you're comfortable there."

After feeling another rush of relief and gratitude, I gave the gray she-cat a nod. "I see..." I then felt another rush as I recalled all that I had been told by Barley when I had been just a few moons old. And while I had basically received my confirmation of who these cats were, I hoped this would set it all in stone. "So, the other Clans live in different types of places? Like... maybe... marshes? Or the plains? Or by the water?"

As I had expected, Cinderpelt seemed immensely surprised by my words, and somewhat impressed. "Yes, they do," she replied happily. "ShadowClan, WindClan, and RiverClan, to be exact."

No way...

I then looked over to Sandstorm as she let out a purr, and I met her confused, amazed emerald gaze. "Was that all a wild guess, or...?"

I then gave a shy shrug as I continued to try to hold back my excitement. "Heh, well, I may have heard about you all before,

when I was little. Um..."

I then briefly closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *Here's the real confirmation. Are these the same wild cats that I once begged to know so much about?* "I don't know if you all know Barley? He's the one that first told me about these Clans."

"Barley?"

I then looked ahead, surprised when I realized that it seemed to be Firestar that had spoken. He was already beginning to slow his pace, allowing the large white tom to take the lead while he walked just in front of us. "You know Barley?"

It then felt as if a flame had sparked inside my as I gave the leader a (gentle) enthusiastic nod. "Yes, I do!" I replied happily, hardly being able to believe what I was hearing. "My parents and I used to visit his barn all of the time, but..."

I then gave another small shrug as I was hit with a small wave of sadness. "But... it's been a while. I miss him a lot."

"You miss him, huh?" the cat I'd heard Firestar address as Graystripe then meowed, this gray tom also slowing down to walk by the leader. "Sounds like you two were well-acquainted."

He then gave the flame-colored tom a nudge. "Firestar, maybe this makes Mist seem a little less suspicious?"

I then couldn't help but let out a slightly exasperated huff when I recognized a certain hiss come from the crowd. "Please. You could say that he was once acquainted with Tigerstar," I heard Dustpelt bark. "That says nothing."

With those words, I couldn't help but let out a nervous, but amused sniff. "Are you sure some of these cats actually want me to be comfortable?"

"They better," Sandstorm muttered, seeming to flash Dustpelt an annoyed glance.

On my other side, Cinderpelt also let out a sigh. "I promise, they

do," she purred before lowering her voice just slightly. "There's just a small wall of indignation that has to be broken down first..."

Firestar, clearly having heard that comment, also let out a purr before letting out a sigh and meowing, "Barley is a dear friend of ThunderClan's. We sometimes stop by the barn on our way to this place called the Highstones."

I then felt a chill run down my spine, recalling some of the words that Barley himself had spoken all those moons ago. *I actually am somewhat acquainted with the forest cats, and have gotten to know their leader. They definitely seem to be the more kind and welcoming group, I have to admit.*

I then couldn't help but shake my head in amazement. *Wow... I actually found them.*

I then flicked my ears as I realized another part of Firestar's sentence also carried significance for me. "Highstones?" I then repeated, hoping that I'd heard the tom correctly. "Is that that weird place with lots of boulders and pokey rocks?"

Relief briefly seemed to flash through Firestar's eyes as he gave a nod. "Indeed, it is."

"Have you been there?" Sandstorm then asked, her head tilting to the side.

I gave another gentle nod, wishing so greatly that I could somehow comfort my kit and quiet her mews. "I have, actually – my parents took me there when I was younger..." I answered, feeling another rush of sadness. But, instead of pushing it away, I once again tried to let it run its course as I focused on the memory. "We played all day... and then watched the sun set." *Such an amazing days that I'll always miss.*

I then looked lovingly down at my kit as my heart began to fill up with warmth. *I'll have them again, in a way...*

I then blinked back at Firestar excitedly. "We'd actually just left Barley's farm a few days before!"

Firestar then began to shake his head in amazement, exchanging a surprised glance with Graystripe. "Wow, it seems like Barley has welcomed several different guests. I always thought we were the only ones who ever stopped by!"

"Well..." I then began, having to also begin shaking my head in amazement as this surreal situation continued to sink in. "...He did speak very well of you all!"

"Well, then it's a mutual admiration society," Graystripe then purred as he winked.

After I gave another purr, I looked back at Sandstorm as I heard her let out a contemplative grunt. "Hm... it seems like you've traveled a great deal," the light ginger she-cat seemed to observe out loud. "Were you a loner before you joined ThunderClan?"

I gave a small nod, not having heard the word *loner* many times before, but I simply took it for what it was. "Yes, me and my parents were," I answered. And after both Cinderpelt and Sandstorm flashed me looks of sympathy, I assumed that they understood that I had lost Chrissy and Sparrow. *But they can hear the details another time... they surely don't want to hear about that right now...*

And after I let out a shaky sigh, I went on. "We traveled to different places every single day – to *forests*, plains, marshes, caves, mountains..."

I then trailed off for just a moment, already for some reason worrying that I was talking a lot. However, I quickly pushed back on that thought. Honestly... these cats may need anything else to think about at the moment. "We never settled down, but..." I then meowed. "After I lost them, I needed a change. After all of the different places I had been in my lifetime, BloodClan was my last stop."

I then felt another twinge of excitement and gave a lash of my tail. "Well... one of my last stops!"

Beside me, as I had hoped, Sandstorm seemed genuinely interested as she slowly nodded at my words. "Fascinating," she murmured,

seeming to exchange a glance with Firestar.

"Speaking of which," Cinderpelt then purred, slowly and steadily stepping away from me so that she was trailing closer to Firestar and Graystripe. "We've arrived to your next stop!"

Still feeling like everything I had experienced today was not real, or just a dream... or nightmare, I simply watched in awe as a large gorse tunnel came into sight, with Cinderpelt standing to the side of it as the rest of the Clan ahead of us trickled in.

And once me, Cinderpelt, and Sandstorm were the last ones, Cinderpelt almost seemed to give an excited squeal as she let the two of us through the tunnel. "Come on in!"

And with that, I gave the two wild cats a nervous look, taking a deep breath as I continued to follow the gray she-cat through the gorse.

I had no idea what to expect. And while that was what I used to be so used to. Something about this felt... different. *Like... I know that I'm likely spending more than one night here...*

Something about that was incredibly intimidating, aside from the fact that the only other place I had done that with was Barley's farm... and then BloodClan.

However, as soon as we made it to the other side of the tunnel, I was more than amazed by what I saw.

It was a ravine, alright, but not like any that I had ever seen before.

It was beautiful, with walls covered in vines and ivy. Scattered about were what looked like several dens woven together with brambles, branches, and leaves. Then, close to the center of camp was a large rock, which seemed to tower over everything else.

Amidst all of this, of course, were the cats of ThunderClan, gathered around and all clearly tense with the given situation, but at the same time also looking so powerful and prideful as they stood in their spectacular home.

And weirdly, at this sight, I also found myself feeling a rush of pride, feeling so happy that my daughter would get to begin her life in a place like this.

And while her sweet little eyes likely wouldn't open for another couple of days, I still felt the need to set her down, and let her feel the ground and get a better feel of her surroundings. So, I gently set her down at the paws, immediately pulling her close to my safety. Welcome to your first home, my love... I then thought, feeling my heart swell all over again as the little brown tabby and white bundle tumbled around at my paws, mewling away.

I then flicked my ears, looking up once again as I quickly noticed the flame-colored pelt of Firestar begin to leap to the top of the large rock, wondering if this was maybe the place where the leader made their announcements.

So, despite all of the questions I wanted to ask about this place, this Clan, the other Clans, and the ravine, I simply stayed quiet, Sandstorm and Cinderpelt still next to me, as Firestar made it to the top of the rock and began to speak. "All cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock!"

Highrock? Makes sense... "What's going on?" I still figured I'd ask the two she-cats next to me.

"He's probably going to tell everyone what just happened, and we're going to figure out what to do about it," Sandstorm whispered. And to my surprise, she then stood up. "What your... former mate brought upon us." Then, after I flashed the she-cat an apologetic glance, I watched as she then padded ahead to stand just under this *Highrock*.

I then gave a surprised blink as I felt Cinderpelt's breath on my ear. "I am shocked that you did not withhold that information," she then whispered.

I then let out an amused sniff. "I suppose I did for a bit..." I whispered back with laughter in my voice. "I could have told you while you were helping me give birth, but maybe I actually needed your help."

"Oh, please!" Cinderpelt then purred as we watched all of the cats of ThunderClan gather. "I would have helped you anyhow."

Suddenly feeling another rush of warmth, I flashed Cinderpelt a grateful look, feeling so touched by her genuine kindness, before looking back to the rock and listening as Firestar finally spoke.

"Cats of ThunderClan," the ThunderClan leader began. "You have heard of the threat that faces us. BloodClan has come from the Twolegplace and laid claim to the forest."

I took a deep breath, trying to push down my anger, betrayal, and shame that began to flood through my blood. And I found myself pulling my daughter closer to me as Firestar went on. "They want us to run away and let them take over without a fight," he meowed out. "But three days from now, we will stand together with WindClan and make BloodClan fight for every mouselength of the forest!"

"What about RiverClan and ShadowClan?" the big white fluffy tom called up from where he was also sitting at the bottom of the rock. "Will they fight? And if they do, which side will they be on?"

Just as the tom was asking this question, I felt Cinderpelt lean into me once again. "Unfortunately, ShadowClan and RiverClan have been on Tigerstar's side in this whole mess, calling themselves *TigerClan*," the she-cat explained to me in a whisper. "We have no idea where they stand right now, however." And after I gave her a nod in understanding, Firestar finally answered the initial question.

"That's a good question, Whitestorm," the leader replied with a sigh. "And I don't know the answer. The TigerClan warriors ran away when Tigerstar died."

Cowards... I then nearly gasped aloud as I blinked in surprise at that thought. *Wow, that's definitely the BloodClan in me...*

"Then we need to know where they went," Whitestorm then meowed authoritatively.

"I could slip over into RiverClan to see," a gray-blue she-cat then

called out near the back of the crowd. "I know all of the best places to hide."

Firestar immediately shook his head. "No. You're in more danger over there than any cat," the leader insisted. "We don't know if TigerClan are still persecuting half-Clan cats, and I don't want to lose you. ThunderClan needs you, Mistyfoot."

For a moment, I just stood there, feeling completely amazed all over again – the fact that this *TigerClan* was persecuting these "half-Clan" cats was one thing, sure. However, I had quickly been able to observe that Mistyfoot was probably not from this Clan – she smelled of the river and fish, and was standing a bit away from everyone else. Yet, she was still being shown so much compassion. *Everyone is...*

"We can find out most of what we need from border patrols," Whitestorm then suggested, giving Mistyfoot a reassuring look.

Firestar gave a nod in response. "That's your job, Whitestorm," the leader commented. "Alright, I want extra border patrols along the RiverClan and ShadowClan borders..."

And from there, I simply continued to watch in awe as Firestar continued to do what seemed like make plans for their fight that was to happen in three days. *Three days... goodness gracious*.

To be honest, three days would seem like too much time for BloodClan if they knew a fight was upon them. So, I was already appalled by how vastly different things were done in this Clan. I mean, I'd known that from the moment I first faced these cats. *But... rather than these cats just being several cats that just happen to live in the same place and coexist... these cats seem to exist together...* I then thought, their unification really being so obvious, and their words to each other flowing like pebbles in a stream. *It's incredible, and so refreshing...*

"...As for the rest of you – warriors, apprentices, and elders," Firestar went on, seeming to be finishing up. "You have three days to prepare. Graystripe, will you supervise a training program?"

I swear.

"No problem, Firestar!" Graystripe immediately replied enthusiastically.

"Get a couple of the others to help you... and rotate the training sessions so that Whitestorm has enough cats for his patrols, and for hunting."

I then blinked in surprise when Firestar shifted his green gaze, nodding in my general direction. "Cinderpelt, are you ready to look after the wounded?"

As I had expected, Cinderpelt gave a determined nod next to me. "Everything's prepared," she answered confidently. I then felt her lightly place the tip of her tail on my shoulder. "But I do have Mist to look after, and there'll be plenty more to do once the fighting starts. If you could let me have an apprentice to help, that would be great."

As I tried to push down my guilt at giving Cinderpelt and others more to worry about, I simultaneously felt a pang of nerves as I watched Firestar blink and give a flick of his ears. "Ah, yes," he replied before looking out to the rest of the Clan. "Many of you already know, but Mist is a loner that we found in the forest on our way back here."

"A *loner*?" I then heard Cloudtail call out from the crowd. "A former BloodClan cat, Firestar. A former BloodClan cat."

I then heard Sandstorm let out a hiss from her place by the Highrock. "A former BloodClan cat that has just given birth!"

Firestar then shut his eyes for a moment, raising his tail to ask for silence. "I am fully aware of that, Cloudtail," the leader replied sharply before addressing the entire Clan again. "She will be taking shelter here until she recovers, and until her kit becomes stronger."

He then gave a shake of his head, letting out a mix of what sounded like a huff and a purr of amusement. "If anyone wants to object – don't. We honestly don't have time to argue about it anymore."

Then, after the leader took another deep breath, he nodded back towards Cinderpelt. "You can have Fernpaw help you out," he then meowed before nodding with concern over to a smaller gray-speckled she-cat. "Fernpaw, if that's alright with you?"

Fernpaw quickly nodded, and all over again, I suddenly felt the weird sense of pride as Firestar then continued to gaze down at his entire Clan, the now twilight sun beaming onto their fur. "Now, eat well, and get a good sleep tonight," he then meowed from above. "Tomorrow we'll begin – and in three days we'll be ready to show Scourge and his Clan that our forest will never be theirs for the taking."

Heck yes, you will.

Even as cats then began to disperse, I found that I still couldn't move at all, having become absolutely mesmerized by these cats and the plans they were making. To be honest, I almost wanted to stay and listen more... maybe even put in my own input? *But they'd never take it. Not right now. Anything I'd say they'd probably see as a set-up... which is fair.*

And anyway, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Cinderpelt bending down to pick up my kit, and she then took my weight again as we began to pad deeper into the ravine. "Here, while cats settle in and continue to deliberate, I need to get you to my medicine den as soon as possible – you and your little one need to rest!"

I then glanced back at Cinderpelt to see her flashing me a half-amused, half-urging look, almost as if she could read my own thoughts. And after I gave her a joking roll of my eyes, she came to a stop where I found myself standing in front of a tunnel, with an entrance covered by a bramble screen. "Come on in! I'll gather together some herbs that I think you'll need, now that I have access to my full stash!"

After a purr of amusement, I flashed the she-cat yet another look full of gratitude. "Thank you," I meowed warmly to her as she then helped me and my daughter settle down in a moss nest. And with a sigh and another purr, I wrapped my tail around my kit and pulled

her towards me, desperate to make her feel comfortable and warm.

And weirdly, I felt like she would be comfortable and warm soon, and even more weirdly, I myself felt safer and more reassured than I had felt in a very long time. And as I looked out through the bramble screen entrance and into the camp, I felt a strange sense of warmth and excitement...

I truly had found these cats that Barley had spoken about all of those moons ago, and while they had their fair share of cats that seemed to have several burrs in their fur, they seemed just as fascinating and wonderful as Barley had said they were, nevertheless.

And I honestly felt another chill down my spine at the strength and resilience that I could feel spread around this camp. And even if I hadn't ever felt betrayed by Scourge or BloodClan, or had never had anything against them, it still felt so, so easy to side with this Clan as opposed to them

I was almost certain already that these were good cats that had been tricked, and now they had to fight for their place and for each other.

And to be honest, I already was sure these cats had the higher up – ThunderClan had something special that BloodClan would never, ever have.

Chapter 22

[image]

So far, I had been nothing but amazed by all of the chaos that I had gotten to witness in the last day. Honestly, it had already felt like I had been here in ThunderClan for an entire moon.

And *honestly*, it had never been so hard for me to stay put.

Sure, it was still hard to stay put with how I had lived my life as a young cat – not staying in one place for more than one full day – but with being involved with these wild cats – no, *Clans* – was a whole different story. It wasn't a matter of wanting to leave them. Not at all, actually. Rather, I was feeling incredibly antsy simply lying in this den as the Clan prepared for what seemed like the biggest fight they would ever have to endure.

Along with that, they were preparing to fight the cats that I had lived with for *moons*. And I couldn't believe how easy it was to root for ThunderClan instead, and how easy it felt to want to fight beside them.

But of course, despite all of that, I wasn't going to move a muscle.

I had been taken here to simply rest in this nursery, and to take care of this amazing, beautiful and perfect daughter that was currently snuggled deep into my flank, having just suckled and was now taking a light nap. *And thank goodness the two of us are in this nursery at all...*

After the two of us had spent last night in the medicine den, Cinderpelt had quickly given me the "okay" to move to the nursery and rest there instead. When I had carried my kit in there, I had been more than shocked to see that Fernpaw had already been putting a nest together for me. Then, later, Cloudtail (very warily) had brought me a small mouse to eat.

And after receiving another meal this morning from Bramblepaw, I

had spent the day so enjoying my fresh moss nest, and simply staring down this incredible new life that somehow *I* had created just earlier yesterday. *But soon, that won't be the case...* I told myself. *Eventually, it will just* feel *like yesterday...*

And if all of this battle preparation wasn't going on, it would be all the more easy to just want to watch her and love her and stay next to her forever. *I mean, that's the plan... what am I talking about?*

And as I had for the past day and a half, I felt overwhelmed with love as I looked down at my tiny sleeping figure – still so amazed by her presence, and somehow even more amazed by just how much she looked like my mother. *And if she becomes even the smallest sliver of who Chrissy was...* I thought warmly as a purr began to rise in my throat, *then I've done my job.*

"It's hard to keep your eyes off of them, right?"

I then reluctantly broke my gaze from my daughter, looking over my shoulder as I heard Willowpelt, the other queen that I was currently sharing this den with, meow from the other side of the den. I then couldn't help but purr as the gray she-cat seemed to restlessly be trying to gather together her own kits – Sorrelkit, Sootkit, and Rainkit, who were all practically running in circles around her.

"Practically impossible," I meowed, laughter in my voice as I watched the three little balls of fluff bouncing around the den. "I don't think you could stand to look away from yours even if you wanted to!"

I then let out another purr as Willowpelt let out an exhausted sigh before proceeding to narrow her eyes. "Well, as a matter of fact..."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as she seemed to nod to the den entrance, and I followed her gaze to see the light ginger pelt of Sandstorm crawling in. "Sandstorm, is Whitestorm out there?"

Sandstorm quickly gave a nod, her emerald eyes full of concern. "Yes, he is. He was just finishing his mouse," she answered. "Do you want me to get him for you?"

"Oh, if you could?" Willowpelt then groaned, her eyes still gleaming with humor as she flicked her tail towards her kits. "I think these three need to let out some energy, and they've taken all of mine!"

"Say no more!"

I then nearly let out a purr of amusement as I quickly recognized the thick white fur of Whitestorm follow Sandstorm into the den. All three kits then froze in their places when they noticed the tom come in, their eyes wide with curiosity. "Do you three want a badger ride before I get back to training?"

Sorrelkit let out a squeal, beginning to jump up and down. "Yes, of *course!*"

"Can we stay for the training?" Sootkit then exclaimed, his little tail lashing back and forth.

"Hm, we'll see..." Willowpelt muttered. And this time, I did let out the faintest purr of amusement when I noticed the queen flash Whitestorm a warning look. And after the white tom gave a nod, she began to gently push the kits towards him. "Have fun!"

For a moment, the she-cat then simply watched excitedly as her three little ones pelted out of the den with Whitestorm. Once the four of them were out of sight, she let out a long sigh and settled back down in her nest, flashing me a teasing look. "This will be you in a few quarter moons," she then murmured to me.

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Can't wait!"

"Oh, don't worry, Willowpelt," Sandstorm then purred as she padded deeper into the den. "Firestar seems eager to get them training soon!"

"Oh goodness, don't make me think about it!" the gray queen then sighed, her gaze suddenly solemn. "All of the exhaustion is worth it if it means that I get to have them near me all of the time..." She then gave Sandstorm a wink. "You'd understand if you and Firestar had some little ones!"

I was surprised to see Sandstorm let out a sniff. "Oh, that's the *last*

thing on our mind right now..." the she-cat murmured. And after I felt my own stomach twist up with nerves, as well as and sympathy for her, she gave a quick shake of her head. "Anyway, Mist, Cinderpelt sent me to check on you – she's got her paws full training Fernpaw. Is everything okay? Do you need anything?"

My fear and concern quickly diminished, being replaced with the same absolute astonishment that I'd felt since I'd arrived in this ravine. *As sad as it is... I'm not too used to cats putting my needs before theirs...* "Everything is just fine. Thank you," I replied warmly to Sandstorm. "Cinderpelt brought me borage this morning, and Whitestorm brought me a vole just earlier."

Willowpelt then let out a gasp. "Had you ever had a vole before?"

I shook my head back at the queen. "Surprisingly, I haven't!" I purred to her in reply. "I would have thought we would have run into at least one with all of the forests my parents and I have explored." *Sparrow sure would have gone out of his way to get me one to try if he knew they'd been out there...*

"Goodness, it sounds like you and your parents have traveled the earth!" Sandstorm then breathed in amazement as she pad up to my nest and began to fix its moss.

And I nodded over to her as she did so, my heart beginning to swell up as I let myself recall all of the adventures I had taken with Chrissy and Sparrow. "Well, what was exciting about traveling as much as we did was that there was still so much more to explore, somehow..." *I don't think anything will ever feel as incredible...*

"Do you miss it?" Willowpelt then asked softly, almost as if she had heard my thoughts.

And having to fight my emotions for just a moment, I gave the she-cat a gentle nod. "It's almost all I know," I nearly whispered in reply. But I then let out another purr as I felt my kit squirmed and began to mew next to me, and I looked down to see her small, sweet little face. "But it just means that I'm always ready for a new adventure."

I then felt Sandstorm briefly brush her tail against my shoulder,

before lightly touching my kit's head. "Well, I can't wait to see what kinds of adventures you'll take this little one on." She then let out a purr, seeming surprised as my kit continued to let out her little meows. "Goodness, she's suddenly very talkative!"

I furrowed my eyebrows, nodding to the she-cat in agreement. "My gosh, you're right!" I exclaimed before looking back at Willowpelt. "Your kits are already having an influence!"

As I had hoped, Willowpelt let out a *mrrow* of laughter, and Sandstorm did as well as she padded to the other side of my nest – the side my head was on – and only had tampered with the moss for a few heartbeats before gasping. "Uh, Mist, actually, you might want to take a look at her..."

With those words, my stomach became hollow and my heart seemed to drop down onto the moss. "What!?" I then stood up urgently, the air I was inhaling suddenly seeming scarce. "What do you mean? What's wrong?" *Oh no, has something gone wrong already?*

And to my own misfortune, I was immensely confused when Sandstorm said nothing in reply. In fact, she didn't look scared at all – her emerald eyes seeming to gleam.

But in this moment, for all I knew, this was the moment I was just beginning to see the true colors of these cats that had seemed so wonderful so far. So, despite the she-cat's apparent happiness, I still whipped myself around in a panic so that I could get a good look at my kit, already trying to create solutions in my mind with whatever was wrong.

But practically in the same moment, I felt my heart drop all over again as I immediately noticed that my kit's eyes had opened.

And suddenly, I was also speechless.

"Hm..." Sandstorm murmured warmly as soon as I had noticed. "I guess someone finally decided that they were ready to see the world."

"Wait, really?" Willowpelt then nearly squealed, quickly rising from

her nest and padding over to join us. She then let out a sigh as soon as her eyes fell on my daughter. "Oh my StarClan, Mist, they're beautiful!"

"Beautiful, and such a strange color..." Sandstorm then observed, her eyes narrowing. "I haven't seen something like that in a while... what would you call that, Mist?"

I took a moment to reply to the light ginger she-cat, making sure that my voice would come out even as I spoke. "Hazel," I nearly whispered, my voice still full of emotion. "I suppose I'd call that hazel." *My daughter has hazel eyes.*

"It's basically a reflection of the forest in there... all of that green and brown..." Willowpelt then meowed. "Wow..."

"Yeah... wow," I then breathed, my voice now sounding thicker than the air in the Twolegplace. "The same reflection of the forest that I always saw in my mother's eyes." *I can hardly believe it...*

I then shut my eyes for a moment, trying to block the emotion that was welling up in them as I felt Sandstorm put the tip of her tail on my shoulder. "And now your daughter gets to carry them on," Sandstorm then meowed softly to me, seeming to figure out that my mother was someone that I didn't have in my life anymore. *As to how I lost her... I really feel like that's something I shouldn't disclose right now*, I told myself.

I then was taken away from my thoughts as Willowpelt spoke again. "Wait, you had said that you were waiting for her to open her eyes to name her, right?"

I then was able to purr when Sandstorm let out a gasp, looking back at me with wide eyes. "You haven't named her?"

I purred with amusement and gave the she-cat a shrug. "I had been waiting for her to open her eyes!" I replied with humor in my voice. And now... I could not be more happy that I did...

"Well, then there you go!" Willowpelt meowed, flicking my daughter's little ear, close to her gorgeous eyes, with her tail. "Do

you have anything in mind?"

I stared down at my kit, my heart feeling warmer than the afternoon sun as I simply watched her crawl in our nest, her eyes opening and closing slowly as she seemed to try and get used to the light. "Well..." I then gave a lash of my tail, and sat down in my nest next to my daughter. "As a matter of fact, I do – tell me what you all think..."

Both she-cats eagerly nodded in front of me, and after I took a deep breath, still overwhelmed with emotion, I nodded down to my kit. "I thought about maybe Wren – a wren was my mother's favorite bird."

"To eat?" Sandstorm purred as she tilted her head to the side and raised a single eyebrow.

I let out another *mrrow* of laughter. "Sure, every once in a while... but mainly to listen to," I clarified to the she-cat. "One of her favorite things in the world was to wake up to their chirping."

"Aw, she would have been in luck if she were here," Willowpelt then meowed, bringing me to exchange a warm glance with her. "But my goodness, she looks like a wren bird too, with that brown tabby fur! Seems perfect to me!"

I let out a long sigh of satisfaction. "Lovely," I then breathed, my heart feeling warmer than it had in so many moons as I stared down at my newly-named daughter. "Wren it is, then."

"It truly is perfect," Sandstorm then meowed. "But may I suggest something?"

Genuinely not feeling offended by that comment at all, I gave the ginger she-cat an eager nod.

"What do you think about giving her a warrior name, or a Clan name?" Sandstorm then asked, her gaze warm. "You could keep the Wren at the beginning, but you'd put *kit* at the end, like Willowpelt's kits."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing, and I could only simply

stare back at the she-cat for a moment. *A wild cat name? No, a warrior name?* Having a daughter at all was one thing, but if I had gone back in time and told my own kit self that I'd have a daughter that had a chance to receive a "wild cat", I probably wouldn't have been able to believe it. "Really?" I asked Sandstorm in complete surprise. "Are you sure?"

Sandstorm definitely looked a lot calmer than I was, acting like it was the obvious thing to do as she gave a shrug. "Why not?"

I could only stand for a moment, shaking my head in bewilderment before finally forcing myself to speak. "Well... okay, then!" I purred, happiness spread all over my face as I stared down at my daughter.

Then, as Sandstorm left to continue training, and Willowpelt went outside to check on her kits with Whitestorm, I was simply left amazed, and genuinely feeling more safe and welcome than I had in a very long time. For goodness sake, I'd only been here for a day, but I practically felt dazzled by the care that this *ThunderClan* had shown, and just how quickly they were willing to let me be here. I mean, I'd been given permission to give my kit a *Clan* name. *They're showing just as much care and hospitality as Barley did when I was so young... no wonder they've become friends.*

Along with that, Willowpelt truly had been a wonderful denmate. As I would have expected, the gray queen had been very wary of me at first considering my... *very* recent past, but it didn't take long at all for her to become so kind and welcoming. As for everyone else, they almost seemed to be coming together to make sure I was okay – time permitting, of course. Cinderpelt had made sure to check on me frequently, and when she couldn't do that herself, she sent someone else. Even Firestar or Whitestorm, who I now knew to be ThunderClan's deputy, had come into see me once before, despite how preoccupied they'd been with the coming battle.

Then, as those final few words crossed my mind, I felt a chill run down my spine. *The coming battle...* I thought as looked down at Wrenkit, my head shaking. *Oh, my love, how could you have been born at the best time, and simultaneously the absolute worst time?*

~>~>~>~>~>~

Night eventually fell that day, but I had hardly noticed.

Since Wrenkit had opened her eyes, I had done nothing but stare down at her, my heart feeling so full as I watched her let out her little mews, cuddle up to me, and begin to get used to being able to see – she was either blinking constantly, or simply staring wide-eyed at everything around her.

And as I watched her try to get used to the world around her for the first time, I simply lied there, still hardly believing that I had Wrenkit at all, *or believing that a single small cat could bring me so much warmth and happiness...*

And as much as I didn't want to think about it, I couldn't help but wonder if I would be able to enjoy these moments at all if I were still in BloodClan. It almost *sickened* me to think about it.

Because truthfully, I could be certain now – I had only worried before – that this was not something that would bring Scourge any joy. It would only be an annoyance or burden to him. *Like I was as well, according to him...* I then thought bitterly. *And somehow, I'm sure he would have made it my fault for bringing* his *kit into the world.*

I then found myself having to swallow back a growl rising in my throat. *Goodness, did he ever even really love me?* I asked myself angrily. *Was all of the affection he ever showed me all fake?*

I then let out a small, irritated hiss as I gave a shake of my head. *It doesn't matter. I don't care, and I shouldn't care,* I then told myself sharply. *I don't need him or his love. I should have never needed it.*

I then let out a sigh, looking lovingly down at Wrenkit once again. *Right now, this is the only cat I want in my life.*

I then took a deep breath, closing my eyes. *This is all that I need.*

I then flicked my eyes, my eyes quickly flying open as I heard some yowls of triumph come from outside of the den, mingled with the constant noise of ThunderClan's battle preparation.

I narrowed my eyes, peering my head past the bramble screen to try and get a glance at the action. *Almost all...*

"Wish you could get in on the action, huh?"

I quickly shot my gaze back at Willowpelt, who I hadn't realized had noticed me looking out. And as I met the she-cat's green gaze, I found myself hesitating for a moment and staring back at her sheepishly. "Is that bad?"

"Of course not!" Willowpelt quickly insisted. "You're not alone."

I then tilted my head to the side as I noticed the she-cat grow significantly more pensive. "Of course I trust with all of my heart that ThunderClan will be strong enough for this battle..." she then went on as she stared at the den roof. "But something about being there and being able to fight with them and be apart of it would make me all the *more* certain."

My stomach then seemed to twist as I realized that I felt the exact same way. "That completely makes sense!"

"I bet it's strange..." Willowpelt then murmured as she slowly lowered her head to meet my gaze, her eyes narrowed. "...knowing that all of these strangers are training to fight cats that you've lived with for so long."

I couldn't help but snort. You think? "Oh, most definitely," I replied a bit more politely. I then hesitated for a moment, giving a small shrug. "And... I'm almost as certain as you are that ThunderClan can withstand them."

Again, as if Willowpelt could read my mind, she simply stared back at me with her eyebrows furrowed. "But...?" she prompted.

I briefly flashed her a warm look before narrowing my own eyes, trying to muster up an answer, because there *certainly* was one.

Sure, I hadn't been born in BloodClan, but I had lived with them since I was still a young cat – just about nine or ten moons old. Unfortunately, at some points it had felt like I had been there my whole life, especially when I'd initially felt so determined to block out everything about my past with Chrissy and Sparrow.

And because of that, I had been able to learn so much about what

flowed through the blood of this Clan. While I was there, I had tried to block it all out in the hope that I had been living in a truly good place with truly good cats. But now that I was letting myself acknowledge it all, and now that I had come across a Clan that was so vastly different on all fronts, BloodClan and what BloodClan stood for was plain as day. "But..."

I then took a deep breath before going on. "But BloodClan's weakness is also their biggest strength – they have nothing that that they are fighting for except their determination to show just how vicious they are. The more blood that they pour, the more that they feel that they have won. Each cat that they bring down is a trophy."

I then briefly flashed Willowpelt a reassuring look before glancing back out into the camp. "ThunderClan isn't like that at all... they have so much to fight for, and... I hope that is enough," I then nearly whispered after another moment. "I hope that strength and loyalty will win over ambition and simple bloodthirstiness."

For a moment, I was actually scared that I had somehow freaked out Willowpelt with my words when she didn't immediately reply, but when I anxiously looked back at her, I found that her green eyes were warm and thoughtful. "You want to be fighting with them, don't you?" she then asked me softly.

I raised my eyebrows in shock. "With BloodClan?"

"No – with us."

I then found myself shifting back and forth anxiously in my nest, and tried to focus on Wrenkit's little paw poking at my flank. "Do... do you think that I do?" I then inquired to the queen.

Willowpelt let out a sniff, actually seeming amused that her question had made me wary. "Well, from what I've seen, heard, and from what you've told me, you're done with BloodClan for good, right?"

Would anyone take my word for it if I said yes? "Oh, of course," I still replied.

"That's what I thought," Willowpelt then quickly replied, to my relief. "But, I mean, you only left them yesterday, believe it or not, and..."

She then gave a shrug, causing me to tilt my head to the side. "I feel like *you* feel like you all have some unfinished business."

I narrowed my eyes, trying to process every fiber of every word that Willowpelt was saying to me. And with that, I found myself thinking out loud to her. Oddly enough for me, I already felt so comfortable doing so, with this gray she-cat already having shown me so much kindness and compassion in the last day. "Well, I mean, of course I do, but..."

I then let out a sigh as I looked back down at Wrenkit, who was now beginning to fall asleep. "But... I have her. I have to stay here with her," I then sighed, suddenly feeling guilty that I'd even entertained the thought of fighting with this Clan. "How horrible of me would it be to leave her here just so I can repair some of my own damage?"

"I am more than happy to watch her, Mist. And hey..." I then raised my eyebrows as Willowpelt let out a purr of amusement and gave a shrug. "You don't have much more time that you'll be able to be selfish now that you have your own kit. This might be your last chance."

Those words immediately echoed again in my head. This might be your last chance... oh, no... I then thought, closing my eyes as I let out another sigh, realizing that Willowpelt was probably right. Am I really going to be selfish...?

After several more moments of my mind doing several backflips, I opened my eyes again, slowly shifting my gaze back towards Willowpelt with a nervous gaze. "I wouldn't be fighting just to finish some unfinished business of my own. I hope you know that."

"I feel like I can trust that," Willowpelt then meowed warmly, sounding genuine as she gave me a single nod.

And with her reply, and seeing just how much she trusted me, I felt

all the more encouraged and determined. "I want to fight beside ThunderClan – beside these wild cats," I then declared to the queen. "If I can be apart of what helps you all to keep the forest, and to keep this wonderful group of cats together, then it would be my honor."

For a moment, Willowpelt simply stared proudly and gratefully back at me. "So be it," the she-cat then replied confidently. I was then surprised when she stood up – her nest still empty as her kits finished their playing for the day – padded up to my nest, and gently picked up Wrenkit in her jaws. "We'll see you later."

Suddenly at a loss for words, I felt all that I could do was give Wrenkit a lick on the head, and then flash Willowpelt a look full of gratitude before I left the nursery.

I could hardly believe that I was doing this, but it felt right. However, I was definitely slightly reluctant to see how the Clan would react to me suddenly bursting into the camp all by myself.

But I pushed on, scanning my eyes through the luckily very preoccupied crowd, trying to decide who to talk to. And to my relief, I almost immediately recognized the pelts of Firestar and Sandstorm working with who I now knew to be apprentices Bramblepaw, Tawnypaw, and Ashpaw. And as I had expected, all three of the younger ones simply stared wide-eyed at me as I approached.

Even Sandstorm and Firestar seemed a bit bewildered. "Mist!" the ThunderClan leader exclaimed. "Is everything okay?"

"Aw, foxdung!" Sandstorm then cursed, flashing me an apologetic look. "I meant to bring you a mouse just a little while ago! Are you hungry?"

I shook my head at the two Clan cats. "No, no! I'm great, actually, and so is Wrenkit," I quickly replied, feeling another pang of guilt as I realized that this was the first time I had ever really been apart from my daughter – I was already wondering how long I'd be able to cope. "Willowpelt is watching her, actually."

"Good," Firestar replied, giving a nod. "Then what can we do for you?"

I then found myself needing to take a gulp. "Well, it may be a bit of a tall order, and I have *no* idea if I've gained your trust yet, but..."

I then took a deep breath. "I wanted to ask if..."

I then flicked my ears, having a thought that filled me with excitement, but also made me almost double as nervous to ask about. *Hey, but "what do I have to lose" has been my mantra lately. As long as they don't touch Wrenkit because of my actions, I'm fine.* "...Would I be able to join in on these training sessions? I feel like I would be able to contribute." *Maybe asking to fight with them at this moment would be a little too much. But I want to help in some way.*

As I had expected, Firestar seemed to exchange a surprised glance with Sandstorm. "Well-"

"You know that I have lived in BloodClan for moons and moons..." I then pressed to the leader, feeling more and more determined the more that I spoke. "That may make my case worse, but it also means that I know how they fight. It's not exactly warrior training, I know, but it could be to your benefit, and I want to do whatever I can to assist."

Before Firestar or Sandstorm could even reply, I blinked in surprise as the thick, gray pelt of Graystripe suddenly came into view. "Uh, oh," the tom then meowed as he stood next to Firestar. "Am I hearing what I think I'm hearing?"

"I was thinking the exact same thing..." I then heard Cloudtail mutter, and the next thing I knew, he was also standing next to Firestar.

I found my gaze landing on him as I narrowed my eyes. "Still don't trust me?"

"How *can* I?" the white tom then insisted. "You just got here yesterday, for StarClan's sake! Why are you so determined to be on our side?"

"Truthfully?" I found myself immediately answering as I took a step closer to Cloudtail. "Because I don't think I've ever felt so empowered or inspired since I've been a kit with my parents."

I then nodded towards Firestar. "I always knew about you all because Barley told me so much when I was little, and the real thing has exceeded my expectations," I continued. "I want to see you all succeed, and quite frankly, I want to see BloodClan fail. They don't deserve this forest and they *never* have."

For a few unbearable heartbeats, all four cats simply stared at me. To my surprise, Cloudtail was actually the first to speak. "I didn't need an entire speech," he muttered.

Beside him, Graystripe actually sniffed and gave a shrug. "Hey, I'll take it!"

"Should you?" Cloudtail then pressed to his Clanmate before flashing me an indignant look through blue eyes. "How do we know you're not tricking us?"

I also gave a shrug back to the tom. "Hey... the entirety of BloodClan has already tricked you and managed to keep you on your paws," I answered evenly to him, tilting my head to the side. "Even if I was lying, how much more would one extra scheming cat really hurt you?"

After Cloudtail simply grunted, I let out a sigh and turned to face Firestar and Sandstorm. "Please. I know we don't have much time, but I really don't need that much," I insisted to them. "Just teaching a few moves will take you all a long way, I promise."

I then finally forced myself to keep my mouth shut, trying to remain calm and patient as I then gave the four cats time to ponder my words. Firestar first exchanged another wary glance with Sandstorm, then proceeded to think to himself for what felt like a very, very long time.

So, my ears pricked and I immediately felt my heart lift when the ThunderClan leader finally let out a sigh and nodded. "Alright. Thank you, Mist," he then meowed as he began to scan his green

eyes around the camp. "If everyone is going to learn the moves that you have, you're going to have to shift through all of the groups, and you're going to have to do it fast. We go into battle the morning after tomorrow."

"More than enough time," I insisted to the leader as excitement began to rush through my blood. "Is there anyone you'd like me to start with?"

Firestar narrowed his eyes as he continued to scan the camp. "Hm... I'd approach Whitestorm, Goldenflower and Brackenfur first," he directed me, flashing me a look full of amusement. "They may be a little more open to the idea of you teaching them. In the meantime..."

I then raised my eyebrows as the flame-colored tom gave me a wink. "I'll give the other groups a warning that you'll be coming over – it's probably for the best."

I shrugged and let out a purr. "Fair enough," I breathed before dipping my head to the leader. "Thank you, Firestar."

Then, as the leader gave me a nod in return and padded off into the crowd, I found myself closing my eyes and trying to keep my fur flat as the situation hit me. "Oh, dear..." I then breathed.

I then opened my eyes again as I felt Sandstorm put the tip of her tail on my shoulder. "Good luck," she murmured into my ear.

I sighed once again, flashing the she-cat an appreciative look. "I'll sure need it."

Then, after one last deep breath, I slowly began to approach the cats that Firestar had given to me. And while I was suddenly more nervous that I had been in moons, I was more than ready to show them what I knew.

And, for one of the first times since I had left BloodClan and Scourge, I was immensely thankful for something he had taught me.

Chapter 23

[image]

The next day simultaneously came in what felt like two seasons and two heartbeats. And already, sunhigh was fast approaching.

Despite the sun's heat, a light breeze brushed through my long fur and chilled my front paw as I rose it up in the air. And I could feel both bewildered and curious gazes burning into me as I then explained the simple motion.

"StarClan forbid you'll ever have to use this, however... it is useful if the circumstances come to it," I warily explained to the cats in front of me. "I know that you all are taught to slice throats, but this approach is a little different..."

I then very gently demonstrated my words, slowly beginning to lower my paw down to the ravine ground. "Instead of slashing sideways, I was taught to slash downwards – towards me, if that makes sense."

As I then looked back up, I quickly noticed the intent pale blue gaze of the newly-made warrior, Thornclaw, staring back at me. "What's the difference between going in either direction?"

I gave the young golden brown tabby tom a shrug. "Well, while either could do a lot of damage, I was told it's almost..." I then paused for a moment as I felt a chill run down my spine. "*easier* to come from above as opposed to the side. It almost gives you more momentum, and it's less awkward. Here..."

Then, after a deep breath, I took a glance down at the clump of moss that was at my paws, and then proceeded to demonstrate the slash on it, causing little green bits to fly around me. "And because a little more is going into the slash, you'd likely get the result that you want."

I then noticed Brightheart's white and ginger head nodding out of

the corner of my eye. "I see... that makes sense!" the she-cat exclaimed. She then nodded to the moss I had just attacked. "Could I have a go?"

So excited that one of the cats I was teaching was showing some enthusiasm, I eagerly stepped back and gave a lash of my tail. "Of course! Go for it!"

And with that, I simply watched as Brightheart pawed at the moss, bringing it over to where she had been standing. Then, after she shifted a bit – likely trying to adjust and accommodate for the one good eye she had – she lifted her paw up in the air and then slashed at the clump.

And my mouth immediately dropped as I saw that she had managed to completely slice the moss in half. "Wow, that was amazing!" I breathed.

"Well, of course it was."

I then rolled my eyes as I watched Cloudtail pad up to stand next to his mate, giving her a nuzzle of her neck fur with his muzzle. "These BloodClan cats will never know what hit them!"

"Yeah – that was great, Brightheart," Thornclaw then meowed, giving his sister a nod. "Really."

Brightheart also gave a roll of her one good eye, flashing both her mate and her brother an affectionate, grateful look. "Oh, please." She then nodded to me. "These moves make it all significantly easier. Thank you, Mist."

"Oh, whatever," Cloudtail then huffed, causing me to let out a sigh. "For all we know she's still plotting against us."

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as the fluffy white tom then flashed me a shy look full of reluctance. "Maybe."

"These are really moves that you learned in BloodClan?" Thornclaw then asked me, his blue eyes narrowed with both fascination and wariness.

I sighed and gave a shrug, having no reason to lie to the young tom. "...Unfortunately," I admitted. "In fact... I learned them all from Scourge himself."

I then shifted my gaze quickly over to Cloudtail and Brightheart, who were both now staring back at me in shock. "I'm not sure if that gives me more or less credibility..." I then muttered sheepishly.

I simply stood frozen for a moment, watching as Cloudtail seemed to hesitate, then let out a groan. "Well, either way, I suppose you taught them to us," he then muttered, suddenly looking at any place *but* me. "Thanks."

With that, I then couldn't help but let out a sigh and close my eyes in relief, genuinely so glad that I was being accepted with what I was doing. Along with that, these moves really seemed to be helping these cats and were giving them more reassurance. *And... it's all so much more productive than just stealing food from the Twolegplace all day and sneaking around... and all for cats that just lie around all day and pretend to be vicious...*

And as wonderful and productive as it all felt, I also knew that this was costing me quite a lot – for one, I missed my kit so much that it almost seemed to hurt physically.

Or, maybe it hurt physically because I was still pretty fresh out of giving birth to little Wrenkit. To be honest, I was absolutely *exhausted*, and what was worse was that I hadn't even managed to meet with every cat in the Clan yet and teach them what I knew.

But if I really wanted to make a mark and help these cats out, I knew that I would have to push through and keep going. Luckily, I was forced to do that when Thornclaw's voice broke through my thoughts. "Yes, thank you," he purred just a moment after Cloudtail's meow.

I then flicked my ears in surprise as his eyebrows quickly furrowed, and the golden brown tabby seemed to be trying to peer past me. "Hey, what's going on?"

Of course, immediately curious, I first looked over my shoulder and

then proceeded to fully turn around as I quickly noticed many cats that seemed to be gathering around the ThunderClan entrance. I only had to wonder for a moment what all of the fuss about as I then could see a cat that I had never seen before – a black tom with white paws – pad through the gorse tunnel.

And considering just how calm the ThunderClan cats around him appeared to be, I had to assume that this was someone that they all knew. *Someone from another one of the Clans, perhaps?*

I then continued to watch curiously as I saw the flame-colored pelt of Firestar run excitedly up to meet the stranger. "Ravenpaw! Welcome. And..."

My eyes then widened in anticipation as Firestar narrowed his green eyes and peered past Ravenpaw towards the tunnel. "Barley?"

No...

I actually thought that I had completely misheard Firestar for a moment, and I even still thought my brain was messing with me somehow when I quickly recognized the black and white pelt of my old friend pad into camp behind Ravenpaw.

I felt both my heart and my stomach drop. *It is too good to be true...*

The tom then seemed to give Firestar a nod in greeting before proceeding to nervously look around the camp. And even though I knew Barley pretty well, I felt that any cat would be able to deduce that he had never been here before with how uncomfortable he looked.

And as much as I wanted to run up to him to greet him myself, I could only stand in shock for several heartbeats as I watched him, I suppose almost waiting for him to notice me first. *If he even does!* I thought to myself nervously. *It's been so, so long...*

But soon enough, my worries were answered and appeased. After Barley's gaze then went to my general direction, his blue eyes seemed to flash with surprise as the two of us locked gazes.

I continued to stand still as he only stared back at me for a few

moments, now looking almost *urgent* as Ravenpaw and Firestar continued to speak with each other.

But it was only after a moment that Ravenpaw seemed to notice Barley's strange stance. Although I wasn't within earshot of either of them, I could very easily see Ravenpaw mouth "are you okay?" to his friend.

Barley then gave a slow nod. "Yeah..." I could just barely hear him reply. I then couldn't help but let out a small, excited gasp when the tom then began to pad away from Ravenpaw, whose eyes were now wide with shock. "I'll be right back."

Then, as I both half expected and didn't expect at all, Barley very warily began to approach me as other ThunderClan cats seemed to watch in curiosity and surprise from afar.

And still, I could do nothing but stare at back at him, honestly trying to process and figure out this warm, at-ease, and comforted feeling that I was experiencing – something I don't think I had felt fully since I'd been with my parents.

And it all only grew stronger when the tom finally spoke to me, his eyes now narrowed. "Pardon me if I'm simply making a stranger uncomfortable, but..."

He trailed off for a moment, but when I gave him a shy but bright look, his gaze grew warmer. "But I don't think I am..." He then took another step closer me, and his familiar scent wafted into my nose. "Is that really you, Mist?"

Still overwhelmed with the amount of comfort and happiness I felt, I could only shrug for a moment and give a shake of my head. "In all of my glory," I eventually forced out, my voice thick with emotion.

"Oh my gosh!"

I then let out a purr as the tom ran forward, proceeding to touch his nose to mine and then nuzzle my head with his tail. "Wow, I hardly recognized you, you've grown so much! Well, no wonder..." He then

stepped back, revealing his sad, solemn gaze. "It's been so long."

"Oh, too, too long!" I immediately replied to the tom, then not being able to resist burying my muzzle into the tom's fur. "Oh, Barley, I've missed you so much, you have no idea." *Oh, the amount of times I wanted to visit you, even when I felt like I couldn't...*

After a few heartbeats, I then pulled away to see Ravenpaw and Firestar quickly padding up to the two of us. Luckily, they only looked a little concerned, and mainly just amused.

I then watched, suddenly intrigued, as Ravenpaw flanked Barley, flashing him a deep, affectionate look as he gave the tom a nudge. "I'm sorry, did I miss something?"

Barley flashed me a brief look before looking back at his friend. "Oh, sorry – Ravenpaw – this is Mist! Do you remember me telling you about her? She and her parents used to stop by the barn all of the time, before you got there."

Ravenpaw's eyes then widened, and he gave me one of the kindest glances I had ever seen. "Of course I do!" the black tom then replied, just when I thought my heart couldn't feel any warmer or any bigger. "Mist, it's wonderful to meet you."

I still was shaking my head in disbelief. Barley told one of his friends about me, Chrissy and Sparrow? So gosh darn sweet...

I then blinked with intrigue as Ravenpaw's eyes widened, and he looked back and forth between Barley and me. "Wait, when was the last time you saw each other? It's had to have been moons and moons, right?"

"Longer, my goodness!" I breathed, exchanging a look of disbelief with Barley.

"Last time I saw you, you were, what? Like six or seven moons old?" Barley then asked me, his eyes wide.

"My goodness, that's *insane*..." I then replied. I then locked eyes with the black and white tom again as I murmured, "So, so much has changed."

Barley then began to shake his own head. "Well, the fact that you're... *here* is one thing, among many, I-" I then let out a purr of amusement as he then seemed to grow frantic, giving a quick nod back at Ravenpaw. "Well, where to start, well – Mist, this is Ravenpaw. He came over to live with in the farm just a little while after you and your parents stopped coming by."

I then raised my eyebrows as Barley gave a lash of his tail. "Before that, believe it or not, he actually lived here in ThunderClan. Who knew I'd end up living with a wild cat, huh?"

Genuinely shocked by that, I let out another purr and gave a shake of my head. "No way!" I exclaimed before then nodding to Barley's friend. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Ravenpaw. You've got an incredible denmate you're living with – I hope you know that."

I then found myself having to suppress another purr as I then observed yet another quote affectionate look that Ravenpaw gave to Barley. "Aw, I do," Ravenpaw meowed warmly as he gave the black and white tom a nudge. "And he's told me wonderful things about you and your parents."

I then watched as he then let out a sigh and gave a shake of his fur. He then gave a nod back to Firestar, who had simply been watching our interaction with a warm green gaze. "And as much as I would love to chat some more, and as much as I'm sure you and Barley want to catch up, we have to talk to you, Firestar."

As any cat would with those words, Firestar's eyebrows rose high. "Uh, oh," the leader breathed. "Yes?"

My curiosity was at an all-time high once again as I awaited Ravenpaw's reply. "Well, last night we met Onewhisker on the border of his territory and he told us about Scourge and BloodClan."

After a flinch, I found myself completely frozen all over again.

"We want to help," Ravenpaw went on, his next words a bit more foggy. "But more importantly, Barley has some information for you."

Barley has information? I thought in complete bewilderment. *About*

what?

And I actually grew a bit worried when I felt Barley glance over at me nervously for just a moment, but he quickly looked away as Firestar spoke. "We're grateful for any help that we can get," the ThunderClan leader replied, suddenly sounding quite exhausted.

He then began to pad away towards the Highrock, giving a single lash of his tail. "Perhaps you'd better come to my den."

Darn it.

Suddenly filled with immense disappointment that I wouldn't be able to hear what the three would discuss, I forced myself to step back, giving a nod, as they all gave me murmurs in farewell and then made their way to the Highrock.

Goodness, was I so tempted to follow them and somehow eavesdrop. However, I already respected all three of these cats greatly, and also knew that I didn't want to sneak around them like that. Thank goodness, Thornclaw happened to approach me just moments later and ask me a question about one of the earlier moves I had taught his group. But as I gave my answer, I tried so hard to not to take glances towards the Highrock as I did so.

And to be honest, once Thornclaw had left, I couldn't help but just sun near the Highrock and wait for the three to finish.

It was immensely hard to stay still though. Sure, not only did I want to know what these two toms, especially *Barley*, had to tell Firestar, but I could hardly believe that Barley and I were even within close proximity again. *I had no idea when I'd get to see him again...*

I suppose that I had hoped that I would get to see him soon since the ThunderClan cats apparently knew him, but these circumstances were more than ideal. And... getting to see such a familiar face and a presence I had always associated with such kindness and comfort was exactly what I needed after all that I had been through.

I cannot wait to speak with him more! I then though just moments before I felt my stomach drop again, and then my heart sink. *But...*

what will he think about all that has happened?

I then gave a shake of my head as I looked over my shoulder up at the Highrock. *And what the heck do Barley and Ravenpaw have to say about BloodClan? Does Barley know more about them than I had ever originally thought?*

I then nearly let out a gasp, quickly standing up as I heard movement come from above me. I then urgently looked up to see Firestar leading Barley and Ravenpaw out of his den. They all then leapt down onto the ravine floor, and I felt a twang of excitement as they became within my earshot again.

"Ravenpaw, I'm sure there are so many cats here that would like to see you," Firestar was telling the black tom. He then let out a snort as they all paused by the fresh-kill pile. "And I'm sure they'd appreciate the break and the distraction."

Ravenpaw shrugged and let out a sniff. "Aw, I'd definitely believe the latter a bit more." Then, after Firestar rolled his eyes and gave a purr, Ravenpaw worriedly looked over at Barley. "Will you be okay if I say hi to some of my old Clanmates?"

My heart then rose with hope as Barley immediately gave his friend a nod. "Sure I will! I've got somebody I've got to catch up with as well."

Oh my goodness, is it me*?*

I then had to keep back a squeal of excitement as Ravenpaw smirked, nodding in my direction. "Ah, yes, you do." I then had to hide my own smirk as I watched him warmly touch his nose to Barley's. "We'll catch up in a bit then."

Barley then let out a small purr as Ravenpaw pulled away. "Sounds good," he then meowed softly. "See you later!"

"Great," Firestar then meowed before proceeding to lead Ravenpaw away, looking as excited as a young kit. "Let's go see Graystripe first. I know you've just seen him, but..."

I then watched as Barley slowly padded over me, still looking over

his shoulder as he watched the two toms go off. "Hm, well, we've got a while," he muttered to me as his eyes gleamed. "When those three toms spend time together, it can never be brief."

I gave a dismissive flick of my tail. "Fine by me! Speaking of spending time together..."

I then had to hold back a squeal once again, giving Barley a flick over the ear as I recalled some very *interesting* things that I had noticed earlier. "You and Ravenpaw seem to be pretty well acquainted."

Just as I had hoped, Barley immediately grew shy and looked down at his paws. "Well, we do live together..." he then muttered in the most *pitiful* way.

I started shaking my head back at the tom. "Sure, but... I saw the way he looked at you," I then meowed, becoming incredibly giddy picturing it all over again. "Barley, he looked at you like you were the most glorious sunrise. It..."

I then felt both warmth and immense sadness at the same time as I let out a sigh. "It was just like how Sparrow always looked at Chrissy..." *And not anything like how I was ever looked at by cats I thought loved me...*

Then, giving a quick shake of my head, I gave the black and white tom a gentle nudge. "Come on, I know I'm not loony."

"Oh, don't worry, you're not..." Barley eventually meowed after letting out a sigh. And now, even just by looking at him, I could almost feel the tom's hot ears. "Sure he's... been great."

I then simply watched in excitement as he began to shuffle his paws back and forth. "Strangely, he was first brought to the barn because he was in danger here in ThunderClan."

He then let out a huff, flashing me an exasperated glance. "Long story, but Tigerstar – you may have heard that name by now – had basically threatened to kill him, so he had to get out of there."

I simply stared in disbelief back at the tom for a moment, also

trying to push down anger as I continued to hear just how horrible that *Tigerstar* was. Sure, he did not deserve to be killed at all, but it sounded like he could be blamed partly for the rift between the Clans right now, and... he's pretty much the cause of me losing my parents...

After taking a moment to let my anger diminish, I then shook my head at Barley. "From what I've heard and seen of Tigerstar, that's no surprise."

"Not at all," Barley said solemnly before giving another shy shrug. "But anyway, Ravenpaw and I immediately got along, and... he's been wonderful to have around. He's definitely my dearest friend."

Now forgetting all of the anger I'd felt so strongly just moments ago, I was now practically overwhelmed with warmth at my old friend's words. "That's so, so wonderful," I purred. "I'm so happy for you, Barley." *This tom genuinely deserves the world, and I'm so glad he's found someone that makes him so happy...*

"And I'm so happy that you actually got to meet him!" Barley immediately exclaimed in reply. He then gave yet another shrug. "I'd... I'd actually kind of held out hope that you and your parents would come by again after he'd arrived, but you never did."

With this, I immediately found myself closing my eyes and having to push down guilt. This fact was something that I'd feel remorse for for a very long time. "No, we didn't," I nearly whispered. "And I'm so, so sorry about that."

"Gosh, don't be sorry!" Barley then meowed in his usual incredibly kind tone, and to my relief, it sounded genuine. "I was honestly shocked that you all had come to visit me so many times, considering how much you all love to travel. But that's besides the point."

I then let out a purr as he gave me a nudge. "Either way, I am so curious to know what you have been up to since we last saw each other..." I then raised my eyebrows as he quickly looked at me up and down. "...When you were still significantly smaller than me..."

After giving another purr, I then let out another sigh, already figuring what I would need to disclose to the tom first. "Oh goodness, just you wait..."

I then took a deep breath, making sure that I was calm and articulate when I gave my friend the news. "Well, firstly, as you've maybe observed already... Chrissy and Sparrow aren't with me."

Barley's gaze immediately washed over with sympathy, and he gave me the lightest nod. "Yes, I did notice that," he nearly whispered.

"Yeah, well..." I then took another deep breath, trying to keep my voice steady. "They're gone. Both of them. They..."

I then swallowed hard, trying to fight back emotion as it rose in my throat. "They actually were killed by two of the dogs that Tigerstar sent out. The ones that were meant to be targeted towards the Clans..."

Barley simply stood in silence for a few moments, eventually letting out a sigh and closing his eyes, then proceeding to stay silent for yet another few moments. "Oh, Mist..." I then breathed. "Oh, Mist, I am so, so sorry. I can't even begin to..."

"It's okay," I reassured the tom, hating to see him look so dejected. "Well... you know, not really, but... it gets a little easier every day."

I then shook my head, truly baffled at *myself* as I recalled how I'd handled my grief leading up to this point. "For a while, I didn't even let myself grieve when I should have, thinking that it would make things easier, but..." I then gave a shrug. "As soon as I let myself be sad, things have been getting a little better."

Barley nodded, his eyes full of sympathy all over again. "I'm glad," he meowed warmly, though I could tell he was trying to push back his sadness while he spoke to me. "They were truly two of the most wonderful cats I'd ever gotten the pleasure to know. I'll miss them a whole lot."

I then purred as he gave me a nudge, and he changed the subject. "Well, what did you do once you were on your own?"

Well, things aren't getting much better from here... "Oh, goodness..." I then breathed.

"Uh, oh," Barley then meowed, his eyes quickly widening.

"Uh, oh, indeed," I sighed in reply. "Um..."

I then hesitated for a few moments, having absolutely no idea how to go into this next phase of my life. But nevertheless, I tried to push through. "Well, as juvenile as it sounds, I needed a change, and... I actually found my way to the Twolegplace, and..."

Despite me already feeling Barley's completely appalled gaze burn into my fur, I went on. "And... to BloodClan..."

As I had expected, Barley then fell completely silent at these words. But, despite that, I tried my best to explain what I had experienced there – everything from beginning to end. Everything from trying to take care of myself there despite every cat questioning my presence, running into Scourge, to being saved by the dog, to fighting a dog in order to be welcomed into the Clan, to me and Scourge getting together, and everything leading up to a couple of days ago.

Luckily, Barley listened intently, his eyes wide the entire time, and honestly, sometimes I couldn't tell if he was concerned or sickened by my words... maybe both.

"And after I gave birth to Wrenkit, ThunderClan took me in," I then meowed as I finally tried to bring everything to a close. "And since then, I've done nothing but take care of her and make sure that these cats feel ready for this battle."

I then took a deep breath, exhausted as I had to recall everything. However, I was so thankful to still feel satisfied by the end of it, and because of how it all ended. "Things... things are okay, really."

As I had expected, Barley took a moment, simply shaking his head slowly back and forth as he tried to process everything. "My word..." he then eventually breathed.

"Right?" I then purred despite my immense nerves.

The black and white tom then let out a snort. "To be honest, this isn't exactly what I pictured when I always wondered what you were up to..."

"Fair enough!"

"Wow... so..." Barley then gave a shake of his head again, as if he was trying to make sure everything that he was experiencing was real. "You were a BloodClan cat, huh?" He then asked me with wide, concerned and sympathetic eyes.

And with that gaze, I was filled with shame and regret all over again. "Yeah... I don't even know what I was thinking. I don't even think I knew what I was thinking at the time!" I nearly laughed as I began to explain. "I mean, I remember all those moons ago when you had told me about the cats that lived in the Twolegplace, and how dangerous they were, but..."

I then shook my own head in disbelief. "I guess I was just desperate to be apart of something that didn't remind me at *all* of my past."

I then flashed Barley an apologetic, immensely regretful look. "Unfortunately, I guess you were once apart of that list..." I then let out a hiss, almost having to keep back an irritated growl. "Gosh, what was I thinking?"

"Hey, it's okay," Barley quickly meowed to my relief as he put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "You have regrets, sure, but all of that eventually led you here, right? And I guess you learned some lessons..."

He then let out a small purr and nudged me with his tail. "You just learned them the hard way!" he then exclaimed. "And listen, I'm glad that you came to realize the darkness behind BloodClan. You definitely never belonged there."

With how certain Barley sounded of his words, I couldn't help but narrow my eyes as I recalled the fact that he very likely *knew* some about this place that I had lived in for so many moons. *And the fact that he knows enough to know that I don't belong there really says something...* "How... how did you even know about BloodClan?" I

asked in a whisper. I then narrowed my eyes as I recalled some of the reactions I'd seen when telling him about my time in the horrible place. "You... you didn't seem surprised about anything I was saying."

After a moment's hesitation, the tom gave a shrug. "Well, to put it simply, I wasn't." A chill then ran down my spine as his gaze grew significantly more solemn and grave. "That's because I was born there, Mist. I definitely think I had enough experience to tell you what they were like, or to confirm or validate anything that you went through."

No way...

Completely shocked, the only word I could force out to Barley was, "...what?"

"It's the reason that I was so determined to come with Ravenpaw to talk to Firestar about them," the loner then began to explain. "Like you, I had to experience their treachery firsthand. I was probably about your age when I finally decided to leave."

Barley then closed his eyes as he then seemed to recall his experience. "I snuck out one night, terrified that someone might catch me, but I made it..." He then took a moment to let out a sigh. "And after that is when I found my way to the farm, and..."

I then let out a purr as he flicked my ear with his tail. "Soon after that is when you and your parents made your first visit."

"...Wow, Barley..." I said after a moment, now being the one to have to take a bit to process words. *Well, I suppose his words from long ago all make sense now. He'd definitely be able to tell me if BloodClan was bad news, and... I didn't listen...*

Then, after a quick shake of my head, I asked, "So, you heard from a cat from another Clan that this battle was happening?"

"I did, and Ravenpaw and I immediately agreed that we wanted to help ThunderClan," Barley then meowed, his tone now much more light. "In fact, we want to fight beside you."

I couldn't help but let out a gasp of excitement. "You're going to fight?" I nearly squealed. "With ThunderClan?"

"No doubt about it!" Barley replied with a proud nod. "Sure, we're fighting to defend the farm as well, but Ravenpaw and I are more than happy to fight beside friends."

I was shaking my head slowly all over again, amazed by just how much loyalty Barley and Ravenpaw were already showing this Clan that they didn't even believe in. *But then again...* I then thought. *That's exactly what I'm doing. Wow... this place really has an effect.* "That's amazing, Barley," I then purred, now actually having to push back the smallest twinge of jealously at the fact that he was going to be able to fight in the battle. "I'm sure that Firestar more than appreciates that."

"Gosh, it sounds like he appreciates you too, Mist!" Barley then purred, giving me another flick on the ear. "I've heard what you've been teaching these cats."

I looked down at the ground shyly for a moment, honestly flattered that Firestar had told Ravenpaw and Barley about my work. "Oh, anything I can do to help."

I then gave a shrug, flashing Barley an amazed look as I decided to vocalize my earlier thoughts to him. "I've only been here a couple of days, but with how welcoming they've been to me, it's easy to *want* to help."

Barley gave a slow nod as his eyes gleamed. "They sure have that effect," he then murmured, practically repeating my thoughts.

"They do!" I agreed enthusiastically. "And... it's honestly so refreshing to find a group of cats that have something to fight for."

Barley then slowly nodded back at me, an almost knowing look in his eyes that we both exchanged. "It really is, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah."

"I'm proud of you, Mist," Barley then meowed warmly, looking as joyful as if he were my own parent. "I'm so glad that you found your

way here – I know your parents would be as well."

My heart then seemed to well up with pride, not only by Barley's words, but also because of the fact that he was right. *If Chrissy and Sparrow were to give in and settle down anywhere... it would definitely be in a place like this. I'm certain.* "Thank you, Barley," I then meowed, my voice thick once again.

Barley then sighed, flashing me another warm look. "Sure." I then was surprised to see him give an urgent flick of his ears. "Now, before Ravenpaw tries to drag me away, where is that little kit of yours? I have to see her!"

At those words, my heart immediately felt heavy. Oh my goodness, I've been so caught up in fighting lessons all morning that I haven't been able to see Wrenkit since I woke up! My gosh, do I miss her! "You know, I was thinking the exact same thing!"

Now feeling rushed with excitement, I padded forward and began to lead Barley through camp. "Follow me – she's over here in the nursery!"

And as I continued forward, I almost felt like a kit myself as we both trotted towards the nursery, talking and joking as if there had never been a departure between me and my old friend and mentor.

Chapter 24

[image]

To my disappointment, Barley and Ravenpaw had to depart soon after that trip to the nursery. However, I knew and was trying to tell myself that I would hopefully be seeing Barley again tomorrow before or after the battle.

And after all, once Barley left I allowed myself a little but of extra time to spend with Wrenkit – to play with her, feed her, and... make sure that she knew who her real mother was.

The little scrap had already seemed to grow so much in the past couple of days, and I absolutely *hated* to see what I was missing. But despite that, I knew that I had to remind myself of what Willowpelt had told me – now was the time to be selfish, if at any time. *But time will be running out soon enough... thank goodness Scourge didn't threaten to fight a moon from now.*

And so, the selfishness continued soon enough, and as the sky began to turn orange and pink that day, it was back to training, where I luckily was able to do at least some work with every single cat in the Clan. And while my break with Barley and Wrenkit had managed to replenish me a lot, I still found myself feeling more exhausted than before.

And by the time I was done, and had sent away the last group of the apprentices away, I actually sat down right where I was, letting out a long, heavy sigh.

And to my surprise, just after a few moments, I was able to catch the flame-colored pelt of Firestar approaching to stand by my side. "You've been working hard today, huh?"

I let out a small purr of amusement and another sigh. "Hopefully it looks like I have!"

Firestar also let out a purr and gave a shake of his head. "Of course,"

he then meowed, giving a dip of his head. "Thank you again for your help – I can tell everyone here feels a bit more at ease just knowing how BloodClan fights."

I then let out an eternal sigh, so relieved that my actions were indeed making a mark. *And so relieved that I'm not pushing to my limit and abandoning my kit for nothing...* "Aw, I'm glad I could do that for them," I replied warmly to the leader. "Is there anything else you'd like me to take care of tonight?"

"Oh, Mist, you've done plenty," Firestar meowed, once again to my relief. He then narrowed his eyes as we both stared out at the clearing full of training cats. "In fact, once moonhigh approaches, I'll probably be sending everyone to their dens – what's the use in fighting for our territory on no sleep?" After I let out another purr of amusement, the leader then gave me an inquisitive nod. "Until then, why don't you go out in the forest and get some air?"

I widened my eyes back at the tom. "Oh, Firestar, I couldn't-"

"I insist, Mist. Have you had a moment to breath for the past few days? You leave your Clan, and suddenly a kit is under your care. *Then*, you teach an entire group of cats fighting moves."

When I continued to hesitate, Firestar let out a sniff and nodded towards the camp entrance. "Take a stroll in the forest – clear your head," he urged on. He then gave a shrug. "You might as well get to know the territory anyway."

"Oh..." I answered simply as a quickly began to well up with guilt. *I would absolutely hate to spend more time away from Wrenkit, or even away from ThunderClan if they need my help, but...*

I then closed my eyes for a moment. *But... I think I'm finding that most of my exhaustion is mental, not physical... though physical still very much exists.*

And after a few moments, I opened my eyes again, letting out another sigh. I really do need the air... I'll need it in order to take on anything else.

I then gave a nod to Firestar. "Oh, alright. I will."

"Good," Firestar then meowed as he began to pad away deeper into camp. "As soon as you return, I'll probably be sending you to your den too!"

And with one last purr, I then began to pad in the opposite direction towards the gorse tunnel. And as I then crawled through it, I actually felt my fur slightly tingling with excitement as I recalled some of the interesting wording that Firestar had used with me. *My den...* I then repeated to myself. *And... he said that I should learn the territory.*

I then flicked my ears as I made my way into the forest. *He really makes it sound like I'm staying here... would I be mad at that?*

As this question then crossed my mind, I found myself significantly slowing down my pace. *Not necessarily... not at all, but...*

I then gave a shake of my head as I quickened my pace once again. *I know how things went the last time I finally decided to stay put...*

Deciding to push that to the back of my mind for the time being, simultaneously realizing that I indeed really *did* need this time to myself, I pushed on deeper into the forest and let myself simply marvel at all of the sights – the moonlight that reflected against the leaves, the practically silver tree trunks, the soft grass beneath me, the sweet scents, and the soft sounds of katydids and frogs echoing through the night.

Goodness, had Barley been right. I never belonged in the Twolegplace – I belonged in a place like this.

And... it sounded like I could be in a place like this if I wanted to be...

I then continued to wander, honestly letting my mind empty again as I trekked on. But I quickly paused again as an absolutely wonderful smell overtook my nostrils. Not that anything around here smelled bad, but this scent practically made my fur tingle. *What is that?*

I immediately wanted to follow it, and almost immediately, I found myself in front of what looked like a small batch of small, narrow, purple flowers. They were beautiful, and their smell was so strong, yet calming and soft.

So, at that moment I felt that I could do nothing but lie down for a moment, sprawling my body out into the flowers, letting the cushion of their small petals brush against my fur as the amazing scent continued to flood through my nose.

And as soon as I had settled, I couldn't help but close my eyes and let out a sigh. *This truly is paradise. At least, the paradise I need right now...*

I honestly could not tell how long I ended up lying in those flowers -t very well could have only been a few heartbeats, or an entire sliver of the evening, but either way, my moment eventually came to an end when I heard a twig snap only a little ways away.

I immediately shot back up to my paws, and my fur slowly began to rise as a new, way more unsettling scent then flooded through my nose.

Except, what was most unsettling about it was that the scent wasn't even "new" – it just appeared out of the blue, rather.

Yes, I knew this scent very well – almost *too* well.

And as the pawsteps that I figured were paired with that scent began to come closer, I had no idea if I should run away, stay put, or even be bold enough as to follow the scent.

And only after a heartbeat of consideration, I decided to take the happy medium and stay put, even hoping for a moment that maybe I was just hearing things – I mean, I was still fresh out of BloodClan and was getting used to an entirely new atmosphere.

However, I had never hated being wrong more, and I felt my fur begin to bristle as I immediately recognized the small black pelt that emerged from some brambles up ahead.

Holy shrews' shadows on shambles of sheep.

Scourge and I immediately locked gazes.

And despite all of the anger, reluctance, and uncertainty that violently rushed through my blood, I tried my best to stand my ground, just as I had when Scourge and I had been merely strangers.

It was silent for several moments until Scourge finally spoke, the sound of his voice actually sending a chill down my spine. "Hm. Fancy meeting you here," he muttered, his eyes narrowing down into slits.

I reflected his own gaze. "I could say the same for you."

"What are you doing here, Mist?"

I tilted my head to the side. "And I have to tell you... for *what* reason?"

It was then silent for a few more moments as Scourge simply gave me a hard stare. I then flicked my ears in surprise as the tom then let out a huff and rolled his eyes "Oh, Mist... you did not!"

"What the heck did I do?" I asked, genuinely bewildered... and annoyed by Scourge's ambiguity.

Scourge was now shaking his head in amazement. "You didn't join one of those *Clans*, did you? Is that why you're out here?"

I let out a snort. "As if you care!"

"Well, I have to admit that I do a little bit," Scourge then murmured, his eyes still narrowed. "It makes things a bit complicated – when we defeat the Clans tomorrow, you're going to be right back where you started, huh? Right back in BloodClan."

I let out a hiss of complete disgust, that thought truly making me queasy. "Over my dead body!"

"Hm..." Scourge then grunted, a small smirk then emerging on his face. "That's okay with me."

My eyes then widened, and I was now the one shaking my head in complete amazement. "You... you are truly sick, you know that?" I then closed my eyes, ruthlessly trying to push down feelings of grief and anger. "How did I ever see anything in you? Seriously."

"Oh, stop lying to yourself, Mist," Scourge then hissed back to me, taking a step closer to me. "Just days ago you were practically bowing down at my paws – you literally came out to this forest to try and find me because you couldn't stand to be without me. Cats don't make a switch that fast. Well..."

I then narrowed my eyes again when the tom took yet another step closer to me, a gross smirk still wide across his face. "At least... cats that aren't easily manipulated."

I took a step back, feeling more and more sick with every heartbeat that I let this conversation go on. "Oh, don't even go there, Scourge," I muttered to him through barred teeth. "Say whatever you want to stroke that disgusting ego."

"Well, am I wrong?" Scourge then pushed, taking a step back towards me.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to shut out any emotion that might show any sign of weakness to this cat. "Did I love you?" I pressed to the tom, my voice still slightly breaking. But luckily, the anger of my words quickly took over. "Do I *still* love you? Of course I do," I then hissed. "I will for a long time. But does that mean I can't try to move on?"

Scourge let out a sniff and rolled his eyes. "Please."

I let out an annoyed huff. *I hate when he says that.* "Well, what choice do I have after all that I've seen?"

To my surprise, Scourge then sat down, and it almost annoyed me to see how nonchalantly he was approaching all of this. "Not every cat kills another out of malice, you know," he then meowed, licking a paw and running it over an ear.

"Oh, don't make me sound like an idiot, Scourge!" I then nearly

growled back at him. "Killing a cat was one of many things you've done. And after what you said to me the other day, I..."

After a few moments of hesitating, I then went on. "I... I have no idea if you ever truly loved me back – don't care either way, in fact, I'd rather not know."

I then gave a shake of my head, letting my voice rise again as I simultaneously let my fur rise. "But you *made* me believe that you loved me, and then threw me aside like I never mattered!"

Scourge slowly turned back to look at me from where he'd been staring off to the side, revealing cold blue eyes once again. "Tough."

My jaw dropped, and I hardly believed what I'd just heard. "Tough!?"

"Tough!" Scourge then barked back at me, standing up. "It's a good thing I did. I told you – clearly my priorities weren't straight. I was truly out of my mind."

I then gave a roll of my eyes. "Glad you figured it out," I then muttered. "But is it really out of your mind to have feelings for another cat?"

I then gave a shake of my head. "Forget it – I don't care. Or rather, I don't want to care." *Even though I do a little...*

I then almost simultaneously gave another shake of my head. *Why am I still here? This is all only making me angry.* "What are *you* even doing here?" *Might as well know why my peaceful night was interrupted.*

Scourge smirked once again and gave a shrug. "Why else?" he then purred in a sickening way. He then began to scan his blue eyes around the area. "I figured I should get to know this territory a little bit before it officially becomes mine tomorrow."

I slowly narrowed my eyes back at him. "What makes you think that it will be yours?"

"I'm concerned that you can't guess – you were once apart of

BloodClan," Scourge then sneered, slowly padding towards me. "You know the strength and fortitude that we possess."

I didn't move, simply snorting and shaking my head. "Strength and fortitude, my tail."

Scourge then stopped in his tracks, genuinely seeming taken aback. "What?"

Just where I wanted him to be. "Sure, you all are some of the most vicious, bloodthirsty cats that I've ever seen. That will shed blood, but it won't bring you any fulfillment," I meowed to the tom sharply. "What BloodClan carries in their hearts, if they even have one, isn't enough to defeat these Clan cats."

Scourge then slowly began to narrow his eyes again. I had no idea if my words had packed a punch or not. However, just the fact that he seemed to be considering them was enough for me. "You never truly belonged there then if you don't believe that it is," he eventually replied in an ominous whisper.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to keep his gaze. "I think you'll find that I'm actually quite okay with that."

"Ridiculous."

"What!? Hate to see that I'm forming my own thoughts again?" I then barked back at the BloodClan cat. "Sorry, but it's true, and you'll find that out come tomorrow. I can never be sure of anything, but I can almost be certain that these Clans will *destroy* you. Why?"

I then took a step closer to the tom, who was simply staring coldly at me once again. "Because unlike you, we are fighting for something."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as Scourge sniffed. "We?" he then repeating, bringing me to roll my eyes. "Didn't realize you'd already made yourself apart of them."

"Be quiet, you idiot," I then growled back at the tom. "Fight with all of the strength that you have, but that means nothing if you're not fighting for something."

I then lashed my tail towards the forest around us. "It hasn't taken me long at all to see how much these Clans are fighting for – themselves, their Clanmates, their ancestors, and their home," I went on. "Even if they aren't physically strong, their will to stand for everything they love will give them everything that they need."

My words were only met with the most eerie silence I could ever imagine experiencing, and Scourge's cold eyes continuing to burn deep into my pelt.

And with that, I was finally able to decide that none of this conversation was worth it any more. "I hate that it took me this long to know that cats this fantastic were out there, but we made it. So..." I then took a deep breath, staring with narrowed eyes back at the cat I had once loved so deeply. "So, thanks for making evil all that I knew for a while."

And after I was done, I simply stared back at Scourge, wondering if I'd get any sort of reaction out of him with what I had said. And to my surprise, I actually thought that I saw his blue eyes gleam for just a moment. With what? Who's to say?

Either way, I had no reason to take the time to think about it. It wasn't worth it.

So, without another word, I finally broke my gaze away from Scourge and began to walk away.

And to this day, I'm not too sure if I regret pausing just a few moments later.

And after a deep breath, I looked over my shoulder at where Scourge was still standing. "By the way, not sure if you ever noticed, but... um..."

I then gave a slowly shake of my head and closed my eyes. "Something has happened since we last saw each other."

"Well, obviously."

"Oh, shut up," I hissed, fully turning around to face Scourge once again. I then gave a shy shrug. "Something has... happened to me

that... has to do with you."

"Again, obviously," Scourge then muttered, sounding a bit more irritated.

I then let out a groan, hated that this conversation was already lasting longer than I'd hoped it would. "Oh, come on! Have you even looked at my stomach for a *moment* in the last moon?"

I then felt a twinge of nerves as Scourge's demeanor completely seemed to change, his eyes narrowed once again, and gleaming with a sort-of knowingness. "What does that have to do with-"

"Oh, don't act like you had no idea, Scourge!" I then meowed with exasperation, hardly being able to believe that I was letting this information come out to this idiot. "Believe it or not, but while you've been dilly-dallying off to the forest for the past couple of moons, I've been carrying *our* kit in my stomach. I gave birth to her just after we departed."

I then took a single step closer to him. "You have a daughter, Scourge," I then meowed to the tom grimly. "I don't think you even deserve to know that, and you probably don't care, but I suppose that I'm a bigger cat than that."

Then, after a sigh, I once again turned around and began to walk away. "So, with that in mind... maybe you'll go a bit tamer on ThunderClan tomorrow."

After those words, for a few moments, all I could hear was the swishing of grass and the light breeze making leaves quiver as I began to make my way deeper into the forest.

"Mist?"

Once again, I'm not too sure if I regret pausing. But this time, I didn't bother to look back. There was no need to.

"What is her name?"

My stomach twisted up into a complete knot, and I couldn't help but close my eyes and take a deep breath. "Her name is Wrenkit," I

nearly whispered, my voice thick.

Then, after another several moments of silence, I finally pushed forward again. "Goodbye, Scourge. And good luck tomorrow."

And then, forcing myself to continue to not look back, I began to travel more quickly through the forest and make my way back to the ThunderClan camp.

And while this trip hadn't been at all what I'd expected, I still found that it was exactly what I needed.

I didn't need to have exchanged these final words with Scourge, *but* I still found that I'd been given closure and had somehow come out on top.

And weirdly, despite Scourge's cold disposition, he weirdly had seemed more vulnerable than I'd ever seen him. I knew Scourge, despite how strained and unhealthy our time together had been.

And with our conversation... *confrontation*, there was a chance that Scourge truly had loved me and... maybe even missed me.

And clearly, something had sparked in him when I'd mentioned that he had a daughter. But either way, it didn't matter. *Mist, it doesn't matter.*

Above everything else, this encounter had made it all the more easy for me to decide to fully leave my BloodClan past behind me. I was *more* than excited to see ThunderClan and the other Clans fight them tomorrow. In fact...

I was going to see if I could really *fight* with them tomorrow. Not just teach them how to fight, but *fight. Surely Firestar would let me after my help?*

Not only did I want to fight on the side of these Clans, and on the side that wasn't BloodClan, to be able to fight beside my old friend Barley as well would mean so, so much. And in some weird way, I also felt as if I was fighting for my parents – I could almost be certain that they would stand with cats like this, if any.

As the gorse tunnel then came into sight, I paused for a moment and took a deep breath, puffing my chest with pride. *So be it then.*

As soon as I got into came, I would find Firestar and ask him about it. Hopefully he would be able to see my determination and my genuine desire to stand by his Clan, and that I was more than happy to fight against Scourge and to completely push him and BloodClan away from my existence.

And in fact, as long as my daughter wouldn't ask me about it, she would never know about that time in her mother's life.

Chapter 25

[image]

Everything was eerily silent despite the many, many cats that stood in the place that I now knew to be called *Fourtrees* – the place where all four of the Clans met every full moon in a truce.

Of course, I knew that now, the truce that was happening here was more needed and vital than ever – with all four Clans gathered together now, ready to face the treachery that was BloodClan.

As of now, ThunderClan, ShadowClan, and RiverClan had made it to the hollow, and I was incredibly antsy at the thought of BloodClan possibly arriving before WindClan had the chance to do it first. *And what about Ravenpaw and Barley?* I then thought anxiously as I frantically scanned my eyes around the clearing, having hoped that I'd be able to see my old friend before the chaos that could lead to... who knows what.

And to be honest, I was more than thankful that Firestar had trusted me and allowed me to fight in this battle, rather than having to stay back at camp and simply wonder what was happening, and worry about whether or not cats I cared about – like Barley – were okay.

As soon as I had returned to camp the night before, I luckily had quickly found Firestar standing outside of his den, and after I had expressed my desire and passion to fight with them, he barely showed hesitation and honestly seemed relieved that yet another set of paws would be on their side.

Of course, the one thing that I hated about this was the fact that I wasn't with my dear Wrenkit. However, I was glad that the little one was safe back at camp, and in a way, I actually felt like I was protecting her and taking care of her just as much in this way – *fighting to protect my new home.*

I then flicked my ears, surprised by my own internal words. *Is this my new home?* I then couldn't help but ask myself. *I mean, I've stayed*

with them for a few days now, and I'm fighting with them... but so are Ravenpaw and Barley. Either way, do I want *this to be my new home?*

I then sniffed, tilting my head to the side. *Maybe.*

I then gave a quick shake of my own head. *Definitely not the most pressing matter right now,* I told myself, trying to stay in the moment as I watched some of the Clan cats wander the area and listen to Firestar's directions.

"Graystripe, Mousefur – scout around the hollow," the flame-colored tom commanded two of his cats. "Don't show yourselves. If you see any cats, come back and tell me."

And after Graystripe and Mousefur did as they were told, I genuinely wasn't sure if they were only gone for a few moments, or several, but soon enough, I pulled myself out of my anxious, swirling thoughts once again as I noticed Graystripe emerge back into the clearing, followed by a very tall, lean black and white tom that I had never seen before.

And just as I furrowed my eyebrows in intrigue and confusion, I felt a cat's warmth breath right next to my ear. "That's Tallstar, leader of WindClan," Sandstorm muttered to me as she brushed past me. She then let out a sniff, looking over her shoulder back at me with narrowed eyes. "About time he showed up."

I was able to give the light ginger she-cat a small purr of amusement in response before the WindClan leader began to speak on the other side of the clearing. "Greetings, Firestar," the tom called out as he padded forward to meet the ginger tom. "WindClan are here. All our warriors – and your friends, Barley and Ravenpaw."

Wait, really?

I was then overwhelmed with relief and joy at Tallstar's words, and I actually had to hold back a purr as Ravenpaw and Barley came into sight. Barley and I immediately locked gazes, his blue eyes also full of relief, as him and his dear friend also padded up to approach Firestar.

"We came to help as we promised," Ravenpaw meowed warmly as he twinned his tail with Firestar's in greeting. "We'll fight alongside you, if you'll have us."

"If we'll *have* you?" Firestar then beamed, looking shocked by his friend's words. "You're welcome; you know that."

Barley then gave the leader a nod and a dip of his head. "We're proud to fight with you," he then meowed. And as Ravenpaw then began to be flooded by the pelts of his old Clanmates, Barley met my gaze again and eagerly trotted over to me. "And who knew I'd ever see the day where I'd get to fight beside you?"

I let out a sigh and shrugged. "Gosh, I can hardly believe it myself!" I then purred. I then felt a wave of affection as I met the tom's warm gaze once again. "But it means so much to me, you have no idea."

"Ah, I luckily have some idea," Barley then purred as he nudged me lightly with his tail.

"Well, good," I then replied. And after taking another anxious glance at the Fourtrees clearing, where all four Clans were now gathering, I looked back at my friend with wide eyes. "Are you nervous at all?"

To my surprise, Barley immediately let out a snort. "Am I nervous? Of course!" Then, as he began to lash his tail quickly back and forth, I realized that the older tom was likely just as antsy as I was – understandably. "I mean, having to fight *against* the cats you once lived with? Odd would be an understatement."

His eyes then flashed with concern, and he gave my ear a flick with his tail. "What about you?"

I found myself sighing and immediately letting my head fall to the ground as I began to air out what had also been bugging me since I'd first opened my eyes that morning. "Funny enough, we're in quite similar situations," I muttered, a bit of laughter in my voice.

I could just barely see Barley giving me a slow nod, and just a moment later, I felt his tail rest on my shoulder. "Yes, we are," he

then replied back more softly.

As I spiraled deeper and deeper in my thoughts by the heartbeat, I began to shake my head and spill it all of my worries out to the black and white tom, ones that had been jabbing at me like a thorn in my nest that stayed in place and poked at me no matter how hard I tried to get rid of it. "I mean, I know that I want to fight on this side, but... it's like you said for yourself, these are cats that I once lived with for so long..."

I then shut my eyes for a moment. "I became friends with some of them... *maybe*. And I share a kit with their leader, for StarClan's sake! What if..."

I then cut myself off briefly, almost questioning if I should even say my next words, as I was sure that they would sound completely *pitiful*. But nevertheless, I went on, deciding that I would just give Barley a warning. "Pardon me for sounding dramatic, but... what if it's too much for me to face? I mean, what if I can't even move past my... *past* enough to fight?"

I lifted my head up slightly as I heard Barley let out a purr and wrap his tail around my shoulders. "Well, first off, you're not being dramatic." I then raised my eyebrows in surprise when his next words came out quite a bit louder. "I live with Ravenpaw – I know what dramatic is."

As I then had to suppress laughter, I watched as Ravenpaw looked over his shoulder back at us, his green eyes narrowed. "What was that?"

"Nothing, Ravenpaw," Barley then called back to the tom before turning back to me and giving me a wink. Then, after a moment, he let out a sigh, his tone growing more solemn. "Look, Mist, I completely understand – I mean, you know that I do. But then again... I have to admit, loving someone deeply is never something I experienced while I was there."

"Ah, yeah..." I then murmured as I gave the tom a nudge. "You found that somewhere else."

"*Shhhhhh*," Barley then hissed to me, his eyes gleaming with humor as he brushed his tail over my mouth, causing me to purr. "*Anyway*... listen, Mist – yes, having cared for Scourge in the way that you did will make it all a bit harder, but you sure did leave for a reason, right?"

I immediately let out a snort. "Oh yeah, I sure did." Then, as Barley's words further began to process, I found myself lifting my head up fully. "Yeah, I did..."

"I thought so," Barley then meowed as he gave me a sharp nod. "Sure, even despite that, that will make fighting BloodClan difficult, I know, but..." He then nodded towards the clearing of Clan cats. "After what we talked about yesterday, I can't help but wonder if it would be about as hard... if not *harder*, to fight against *this* side."

My eyes widened at the tom's words, practically shocked by how much that resonated with me. "Maybe that's what's worrying me... because you're right!" I then exclaimed as I followed the farm cat's gaze towards the assembled Clans ahead of us, my head filling with confused thoughts all over again. "I've only known these cats for, well, three sunrises... yet it's so easy to want to stand with them. Why?" Maybe Scourge was right... and I am easily manipulated...

Luckily, Barley's words seemed to refute my own thoughts, and he was able to bring me back to *rational* thinking. "You said it yesterday, Mist – they have something to stand for," he meowed to me. "BloodClan doesn't, and knowing your heart – that's why you left."

I simply nodded back at the tom in awe and agreement, waiting for him to say more. "You're right – it's going to be hard, and it's going to feel weird as heck, but you're stronger than that," he went on. His gaze then softened with grief and sympathy as he tightened his tail's grip on my shoulders. "Knowing you, and your parents, change is *nothing* to you. You can face it, *and*..."

He then gave me another wink. "You *can* move past your past," he then meowed to me warmly, causing my heart to both smile and feel so heavy at the same time. "Only if you want to."

I then had to blink back the emotion that was welling up my eyes. These were simple words that Barley had given me, yet they meant so much. "And I sure do want to," I then meowed hoarsely before giving the tom a nudge, my heart now filling with gratitude. "But I hope you know that you're a part of my past that I'm so glad has returned."

"Me too, Mist," Barley then purred. I then closed my eyes as he bent down and touched his muzzle to my head. "Good luck out there."

As the tom then pulled away, I met the tom's gaze with warm eyes. *It truly is an honor to be able to fight beside him, after all that he has taught me and done for me.* "Thank-"

I then cut my own words off, quickly realizing that the small murmurs that had just been happening all around us very abruptly fell into complete silence – an experience as ominous as if the most vicious thunderstorm suddenly stopped, only leaving a strange overcast calm.

I then felt an immense amount of dread as I noticed that every single cat around me seemed to be facing the same direction. And for a moment, I hesitated to follow the countless gazes, terrified of what I might see, before eventually forcing myself to do so – *there hopefully won't be anything there that I'm not already expecting.*

However, despite telling myself this, I still felt my stomach drop as I looked over to see all of the familiar faces emerge from the opposite side of the clearing – ones that I hadn't seen in only three days, but it truly felt like seasons had gone by since we'd departed. And as I had just talked about with Barley, sure, as proud as I was to have left, I also was filled with so much guilt and discomfort at the sight of cats like Gremlin, Brick, or Fury.

And, of course, seeing Scourge at the front was weirder than anything else, and chills ran down my spine as I heard him speak and break the horrible silence.

"I know you're there!" he called out menacingly. "Come and give me your answer."

And as I closed my eyes, I felt Barley wrap his tail around my shoulders once again, and in that moment, I truly wasn't sure if I could be any more thankful for his support. Not only had we known each other for so long, *but he is someone who completely understands my past...*

Clinging onto that support, I tried to stay calm as Firestar seemed to exchange a few words with the other two Clan leaders – Leopardstar and Tallstar – before bravely stepping forward towards Scourge.

The black tom narrowed his eyes at the gesture, and I felt another chill run down my spine as I observed just how proud he appeared to be. "Greetings," he then meowed just before swiping his tongue around his jaws. "Have you decided to leave? Or do you presume that you can fight against BloodClan?"

"We don't have to fight," Firestar replied, his voice impressively calm. "We will let you go back to the Twolegplace in peace."

Peace? I then thought, actually having to hold back a snort with the ThunderClan leader's words. *Since when has peace ever mattered to BloodClan? That won't sound appealing to them at all.*

And sure enough, Scourge confirmed my thoughts with the cold *mrrow* of laughter he let out. "Go back? Do you really think we are such cowards? No, this is our home now."

I narrowed my eyes, staring back at the tom with a sharp gaze despite knowing that he hadn't noticed me. You are more than cowardly if you think that this is how you should prove that.

"The forest is ours," Firestar then demanded, his voice still even. "We rule here by the will of StarClan."

Scourge then purred with amusement once again, giving a roll of his blue eyes. "StarClan! Tales for kits," he then sneered, his gaze now burning with determination as he looked back at Firestar. "Forest fool, StarClan won't help you now."

Says the tom who wants to become a forest fool, I thought, my heart

then beginning to pound even faster as I noticed Scourge seem to crouch down, preparing to pounce. *Oh, no.*

Then, time simultaneously seemed to freeze, but also go at double the time, as the tom then leapt forward. "Attack!"

"LionClan, attack!" Firestar then called out.

Well, I guess that is me!

And with that, with me now going off of nothing but adrenaline, I also leapt forward, not even sure where I would land or who I would land on, but nevertheless, as mentally prepared as I could be.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Firestar going straight for Scourge, and within moments the two of them seemed to disappear among the dozens of BloodClan and LionClan pelts blending together. I honestly I honestly hated that I was desperate to see if I could get a view of the two of them – not only to check for Firestar's safety, but for Scourge's. *I hate that I still worry about him... despite everything, I thought in frustration. I hate it so, so much.*

But luckily and unluckily for me, there was no time to worry about either of them, and I had no choice but to fully leap into the battle – jumping on the first cat that reeked of the Twolegplace. At first, I had no idea who I was leaping at, but, as I managed to pin down the cat, I felt my heart drop as I immediately recognized Fury.

Below me, her one good eye was blazing with nothing but rage. "You!" she then growled up at me. "You traitor!"

I then let out a pained hiss, my teeth barred as the she-cat then slashed me across the muzzle with large, unsheathed claws, my muzzle immediately feeling warm as blood spilled out of the wound. "Please!" I forced out through the pain. "Would you even welcome me if I ever decided to come back?"

"Don't even try!"

I then gasped in surprise as Fury managed to easily push me away from her. Luckily, I was able to make a smooth landing after being briefly airborne, but just as I was able to stand up straight, Fury

attempted to make a leap at me. I dodged as quickly as I could, but was then thrown off as fury immediately tried again. She then proceeded to dive right into my side – hitting right where it hurt.

I mean, anywhere would have hurt, but this really hurt.

I shut my eyes for a moment, trying to heave through the pain despite how much I already wanted to surrender. *Remember all that you are fighting for, Mist*, I then tried to tell myself. *While you are fighting for your new friends, for Wrenkit, and your parents, Fury gets nothing out of this except for a dead cat at her paws.*

And with this, the adrenaline kicked in once again, and without hesitation I let out a hiss and forcibly rolled over, smashing Fury into the ground and seemingly knocking the air out of her. While the BloodClan cat was trying to stand up and catch her breath, I took advantage of the opportunity and made a deep gash in her flank.

Then, still taking advantage of the moment, I almost let the BloodClan cat in me come out as I then sank my claws deeper into the wound I'd just made, and then lightly put my other front paw to Fury's throat. "Don't worry, I didn't plan on coming back," I growled through gritted teeth to Fury, who was still struggling for breath. "Either way, it doesn't look like there's much you can do about it now."

Rather than pushing harder on the she-cat's throat, I sank my claws of my other paw deeper into Fury's wound. I tried to ignore her pained, hoarse hiss as I then meowed, "Are you really going to try and give this traitor the time of day anymore?"

Fury still managed to roll her eyes as she was just beginning to get her breath back. And I almost felt relieved to be able to step off of the she-cat, and watch her as she ran away. *Good riddance.*

I had managed to chase off one opponent, but it was hard to feel even a little bit of triumph from where I stood practically in the heart of the battle. And despite so much going on, I tried to look around at the chaos around me, still not being able to help wondering where Scourge was, who he was fighting or if he was

okay. But I quickly had to come to the conclusion that once again, he was out of sight. *How about out of mind too?*

This actually somewhat managed to occur once my eyes fell on something else that was happening just a couple of fox-lengths away from me.

I was suddenly alarmed when I immediately recognized the large, muscular figure of Bone menacingly approaching Barley and Ravenpaw, who were currently fighting side by side against two gray tabbies, and I was certain that they had no idea that Bone was behind them.

So, without hesitation, I jumped straight at Bone, not even considering for one moment that this was a ridiculously dumb thing to do. It had always seemed like the tom was almost twice my size, and he verged at the same amount of viciousness and heartlessness that Scourge carried, if not more. And the fact that we used to be in the same group of cats – that I was known as a "traitor" now – certainly wouldn't help matters.

And sure enough, his narrowed eyes flashed with anger as he immediately tossed me off of him, causing me to land hard on the ground. From there, Bone was easily able to slash my flank and pin me down, restraining my movement and preventing me from defending myself in any way.

And with this, I was certain that there was no way that I could push him off of me – he was too big and too strong. And making me feel even more hopeless was the completely victorious look that Bone carried on his face. "Too easy!" he then purred sickeningly as he stared down at me, his claws sinking into my shoulders. "I should have known all along that you never belonged in BloodClan. I tried to tell Scourge that you were a lost cause – so weak and soft."

Despite its uselessness, I still squirmed and tried to struggle under the tom's grip. "I'd take weak and soft over being even a quarter of what you are!"

I then let out a yowl of pain as Bone then scratched across my neck with a single claw. "That's just a small preview of what I'm about to

do..." I then felt my eyes widen, and I felt my heart sink into the ground below me as I then watched Bone slowly lift that same front paw straight up in the air. "Scourge taught you this move, did he not?"

I then screwed my eyes shut, not knowing what else to do except brace for the pain, and hope that it would all be quick. I ruthlessly tried to ignore the grief and sadness that was already tugging at me, and trying to remind me of just how much I was having to lose and to leave.

But at the same time, I was so thankful that I now had so much to lose.

But of course, that didn't make this moment any less scary or hurt any less, and with my eyes still shut, I tried my hardest to wriggle out of Bone's grip before he brought down his paw, which could happen at any moment.

So, I was more than bewildered when Bone's claws were suddenly ripped from my grip.

And actually somewhat not believing that this was even happening, I still brought myself to get up onto my paws and catch my breath – truly never more thankful to be alive. *What the heck just happened?* I wondered, still baffled. *Did someone in ThunderClan help me?*

I then frantically looked around, hoping that I could find my rescuer and thank them, but as I simply looked to the side of me, my eyes seemed to widen bigger than my own face when I actually saw Scourge's smaller pelt pinning Bone down. He then gave him a light scratch on the shoulder and then let him up.

I could do nothing but watch, and not shockingly, Bone looked just as flabbergasted as I felt. "What are you doing, you idiot?" he barked at his leader. "Are you out of your mind?"

I almost couldn't bring myself to look back at Scourge, but I did. "Forget it, Bone!" the black tom growled back in reply. "Get back into battle!"

"Scourge!" Bone then growled back, truly looking angrier than I had ever seen him. "You-"

"Shut up! Forget it!" Scourge then hissed back, his bristling fur making him look almost double his size. "Would you rather spend time interpreting my actions or winning the forest? Get out of here!"

Bone then only hesitated for a moment before flashing his leader an angry, yet somewhat concerned look and finally deciding to leap back into the battle. Scourge watched him go for a moment, and I then completely froze as Scourge looked over his shoulder, back at me.

And as usual, it was a gaze that revealed absolutely nothing.

And it only lasted a moment, before he himself followed Bone back into the chaos.

Of course, I was left there wondering why the heck Scourge had done what he did. *He... he saved my life. He pushed away his own Clanmate to save me,* I thought in complete amazement. *After all that he has said about never caring for me, why would he do that?*

I then let out a hiss of frustration, and gave a quick shake of my head. *You know what, like Scourge said, I could go and try to interpret it for days on end,* I then told myself. *But it's not worth it.*

I then took a deep breath, trying to cling onto that last thought, and also remember everything that Barley and I had talked about just earlier. *Any good deed that Scourge has done is only dangerous to me. And no matter where in his heart that deed came from, nothing will or should be enough for me to give him a sliver of forgiveness. Not when I now already have so much more.*

But despite these thoughts, my heart still felt confused and heavy as I dove back into the battle once again, and as time seemed to go as quickly as the breeze of a hurricane, I managed to chase off a couple more BloodClan cats – fighting alongside Sandstorm in one of them. Luckily, these two BloodClan cats had been ones that I'd maybe talked to once, making the fight hurt a bit less, and the fight

a bit easier. But it also all felt easy just being able to see just how easily the Clans seemed to be staying strong, chasing away one BloodClan cat after the other.

However, I knew that there was no way that BloodClan was fully going to give up or go down unless their leader did – a thought that both relieved me and terrified me immensely. But it was true – if anything, that's who BloodClan stood for – completely blindly, but they did.

And that leader is not someone that I had seen in any capacity since he had saved me from Bone. At least, not until I decided to look up at the large stone known as the Great Rock that stood in the middle of Fourtrees, where I could see Firestar and Scourge facing each other.

I felt my heart drop once again, having no idea where this confrontation could lead.

To my horror, both of them looked gravely injured, and in that moment, for some reason, Scourge looked appalled as Firestar stared back at him – almost as if he was surprised that he was there at all.

But once again, I didn't have time to fully grasp the situation, as terrified and worried as I was. But once again, something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention just a bit more, where I noticed Ravenpaw seeming to help Barley stand up and try to walk him away from the battling cats. And I felt my heart practically skip a beat when I then noticed the deep gash on the black and white tom's shoulder. I both assumed and hoped that my friend would be fine, but there was no way that he would safely be able to fight anymore.

I found myself urgently running over to meet them, standing on Barley's other side to speed the process along. And despite Barley's insistence that he was fine, neither me or Ravenpaw wanted to take any chances.

Then, as we both laid Barley down, with me staying next to Barley while Ravenpaw tried to fetch Cinderpelt, I took the opportunity to

take another glance up at the Great Rock.

And I truly didn't know quite how I felt when I saw both Firestar and Scourge all the way back down on the grass...

And this time, Firestar fully had the BloodClan leader pinned down, with Scourge gravely injured and not seeming to be able to do much to defend himself. *Oh, dear... oh, no. Oh, no.*

Firestar then bent his head down, his teeth meeting the fur of Scourge's throat.

Once again, time seemed to freeze.

And the most violent shudder then ran down my spine as I almost immediately saw the blood that welled from Scourge's neck, and the way that his body began to jerk convulsively. *Oh, no...*

Then, almost simultaneously, he grew still, and his blue eyes stared lifelessly at the sky above.

Oh, dear...

Suddenly, I found that all of my legs were shaking, and my heart was beating so strongly and loudly that I could feel it and hear it in my ears.

I could just barely hear a cat's voice calling out in the distance. "Scourge! No, no!"

I felt dizzy, but I could just barely see Firestar staring at Scourge's body for only a moment before fleeing away from it.

"Scourge!" Another cat then cried out. "Scourge is dead!"

Scourge is dead.

The words that I was hearing didn't even seem real. I couldn't even give one word for what I was feeling, yet I was so overwhelmed with so many feelings at once. So, I found myself sinking down to my paws, not being able to stand anymore. And I let out a small whimper that I had been trying my hardest to suppress, the

pounding of several pawsteps fleeing the clearing echoed in my ears.

Scourge was dead. The cat that I had once loved was dead. The father of my kit was dead.

And he'd spent some of his last moments saving me. No matter what the intent was, he still had done it.

I then managed to shake my head. *No, Mist. Don't think like that. One good deed doesn't erase the past,* I then told myself. *As... as big as it was.* That tom had brought more than enough harm to myself and to so many others.

And because of that, I really, really didn't know how to feel. I wasn't sure if I ever would.

Being so deep into my thoughts, I actually flinched when I then felt a tail touch my shoulder. Alarmed, I looked back, and immediately let out a sigh of relief when I saw Barley standing there, his blue eyes full of pain, but still glowing with sympathy as he stared down at me.

"It's just me, don't worry," he meowed to me softly, then grunting a bit as he struggled to settle down beside me. "How are you?"

I stared back at my friend in complete shock. "How am *I?* How are *you?* I pressed to the tom in bewilderment. "That shoulder injury looked serious!"

I then peered over past the tom's head, trying to get a view of the affected shoulder. "It still *looks* serious!"

"Oh, don't worry," he meowed to me dismissively as he flicked his tail. "Cinderpelt's making the rounds and will get to it soon enough. It's luckily already stopped bleeding."

I then simply watched as the black and white tom slowly and warily glanced over at where Scourge's body still was, but then, not warily at all, he looked back at me with wide, concerned eyes. "How are you?"

I shook my head slowly, genuinely not knowing how to answer. "Uh..." I then nearly purred, almost amused by the absurdity of this situation. "I... I really don't know, to be honest."

"That's alright," Barley quickly reassured me as he nodded. "You don't have to know, Mist."

I then took a deep breath and closed my eyes. *No, I don't.* "Okay," I breathed. I then let out a sigh, feeling exhausted and overwhelmed still as I let my head lay on Barley's good shoulder.

I then dove right back into my deep thoughts once again as I took in all of the new sights around me – the last of the still fleeing BloodClan cats, as well as the Clan cats as they tried to get back up to their paws, either trying to make the effort to get their wounds tended to or to help one of their Clanmates to do so.

Again, it was so different than anything I had ever seen before, and like always, it only left me feeling fascinated and inspired. I was truly so, so thankful that I had been able to fight with them.

It was at the cost of many things, but it was worth it. So, so worth it. "Um..."

"Hm?" Barley inquired, prompting me to go on.

"Barley..." I began very hesitantly as I stared out at the Fourtrees clearing. "Is it weird that despite everything, I haven't felt this free in a long time?"

Barley simply let out a sniff. "Nope," he then meowed as he stared proudly down at me. "That makes sense."

I let out an amused sniff as I stared up at the tom. "Good."

Then, after we exchanged a warm glance, I flicked my ears as I noticed the flame-colored pelt of Firestar approaching, his gaze looking just as tired as I felt, but still, it sparkled with triumph.

And despite the opponent that he had just faced and had taken down, of course, I was immensely relieved that he was okay, and I tried to give him a sincere nod in greeting as he stopped in his

tracks just in front of us.

"Mist, hello," he breathed, nodding to me in return, and then to the tom next to me. "And Barley. Are you two alright?"

Barley let out a sniff, exchanging an amused glance with me. "Ah, we'll get there."

After an amused purr, Firestar then gave another nod. "Good, good. Um..." I then flicked my ears in surprise as the ThunderClan leader then specifically turned to face me, his green eyes now dark, but full of sympathy. "Mist, I... I'm... I also was coming to talk to you about a couple of things..."

Just by this look in his eyes, I could already tell what he was going to say. "First off, I... I wanted to see how you were doing, with... the... I'm..."

I quickly stood up, my gaze hard as I stared back at the leader. "Oh, don't say a word, Firestar," I meowed sharply to him. "If you feel sorry in any capacity because he was my mate... don't be."

I then took a deep breath, closing my eyes for a moment. "Trust me. It's okay, and..." I then flicked my tail towards the clearing of cats. "You did what you needed to do to save your Clans, and all of the Clans." *And for me.*

I then dipped my head to the tom. "I promise. I'll be fine."

For a moment, Firestar didn't reply, and simply stared back at me as he shook his head back and forth. "You are very strong, Mist," he then eventually meowed, his eyes full of admiration. "You definitely have the resilience of a Clan cat, if not more, knowing all that you've gone through."

To my surprise, the leader then briefly looked over his shoulder, where some of the ThunderClan cats like Sandstorm, Graystripe, and a few others had gathered behind him. "But despite that, you still took the time to help our Clan prepare for this battle, and you fought for us as if you've been here your whole life."

Once again, Firestar looked over his shoulder at his Clanmates, then

at Barley for a brief moment – I had no idea why. Then, as he met my gaze again, I truly had no idea what he was going to say next.

"And you're welcome to stay with us for the rest of it, that is, if you'd like to."

I then completely froze, still overwhelmed and hardly being able to believe what I was hearing. Despite all of the hints I'd received up until this point, it still felt unreal and completely outrageous. "R-really?" I then forced out. I then gave a shake of my head. "You really trust me to be a part of your Clan? I was a loyal BloodClan cat a few days ago."

I then heard Cloudtail let out a snort from behind Firestar. "Clearly not that loyal!"

Firestar looked back once again, flashing his kin a warning, yet amused look before he returned his gaze to mine once again. "Well, Mist, what do you say?"

For several moments, I could only stare back at the ThunderClan leader and hesitate. My goodness, not because I was unsure at all. Rather, I was still trying to make sure that this was actually happening. I had felt unsure before, but... now that I was being given this direct open, and this new opportunity to be in a place that I knew made me truly happy and welcome in the time I had been here... there really was no doubt. There was no other place that I would want to me, and no other place that I would want my daughter to grow up in.

And after exchanged yet another look with Barley, my heart barely being able to stand the amount of happiness and pride that glowed in his blue eyes, I looked back at Firestar and gave him another sincere nod. "My goodness, it would truly be my honor."

And my heart began to rush with adrenaline all over again as Firestar gave another nod in return. "It's all mine, Mist."

He then flicked his ears, his green eyes widening. "Oh, by the way, I'd say we should do something about that name of yours, huh?"

At this point, I was completely speechless as Firestar took a few steps closer to me. "Mist, I feel strongly that you will uphold the warrior code to the best of your ability, and you have proven that you would protect and defend this Clan even at the cost of your life."

He then gave another single nod. "And with that, I give you the name Mistpelt. StarClan honors you for your resilience and dedication, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

I then raised my eyebrows as the leader let out a sniff. "Well, once your kit is six moons old," he then added on. "Until then, you will be one of ThunderClan's queens, and you and Wrenkit will be well taken care of in the nursery."

The whole time Firestar was speaking, I was simply staring back at him as I shook my head back and forth in amazement. "Thank you. I... thank you," I managed to get out after a few moments. "There really are no words. I... Thank you."

"Mistpelt!" I then heard Sandstorm call out from the crowd behind Firestar.

"Mistpelt!" Graystripe then joined in.

"Mistpelt! Mistpelt! Mistpelt!" My eyes then widened as the entire crowd cried out my new name. *Mistpelt.*

I then simply stood in my place, beaming with pride as the crowd then seemed to break up, helping the more injured cats to stand up, licking their wounds, some coming up to congratulate me, and of course, some grieving the cats that they had lost due to this battle.

I knew that I was absolutely heartbroken that I would never fully get to know cats like Whitestorm, who had died at the paws of Bone. However, now that I was a part of ThunderClan, I was going to try my best to create a legacy like his – a great one. Now that I was in a place like this, I knew that I was more than capable.

I then flicked my ears as I felt a tail on my shoulder once again. And when I looked over that shoulder, I saw that Barley had now

managed to stand up again, and was staring back at me with gleaming eyes. "Well, Mistpelt, welcome to the forest. For good," he meowed warmly to me, his words almost making me want to squeal.

The farm cat then gave me a nudge, and he tilted his head to the side. "Now that you're nearby again, and in one place, I hope that you'll visit me and Ravenpaw often?"

I immediately gave Barley a sharp nod. "Oh, definitely count on it," I replied to Barley proudly. I then took a deep breath, taking a moment to glance back out at the Fourtrees clearing. "For once, I am certain that I'm not going anywhere."

Chapter 26

[image]

"Um... mother?"

As a small, sweet voice flowed into my ears, I was slowly pulled into consciousness, sunlight already beginning to leak through my blinking lids.

"Mother?"

I then fully opened my eyes, my heart already soaring as I immediately met the beautiful hazel eyes of Wrenkit, the eyes that were glowing with both excitement but worry at the same time.

I let out a purr and gave my daughter a lick on the head. "Good morning, sweetheart."

I then was surprised to see Wrenkit take a step back, her eyes now wide. "I'm sorry! I really didn't want to wake you..."

I let out another purr, honestly amused that Wrenkit seemed to be acting like she had committed a crime. "That's okay, my love!" I meowed to her, flicking one of her small ears with my tail as I stood up. "Is something the matter?"

"No, not at all!" Wrenkit replied, shaking her head quickly. "Actually, I just wanted to ask if I could go over to the medicine den?"

With those words, I immediately felt my heart drop and my eyes widen. "The medicine den?" I pressed to my daughter, my voice rising with worry. "Why? Are you sick?" *And she caught that she was sick before I did? What kind of mother am I?*

"Oh, no! I feel just fine!" Wrenkit quickly reassured me, causing me to let out a huff of relief. "I actually wanted to go see Sandstorm!"

My heart dropped a second time. "Wait... Sandstorm is in the

medicine den?" *Apparently I can't tell what is wrong with my friends either!*

"Yeah!" Wrenkit said in a surprisingly enthusiastic way. I then raised my eyebrows as I noticed she seemed to be holding back a squeal. "She had her kits!"

I then closed my eyes and let out a sigh. "Oh, well if..."

I then let out a gasp and took a step back as my daughter's words fully processed, and I suddenly felt as if I could leap to the top of the Highrock from the ground. "Oh my goodness, Sandstorm had her kits!?"

Wrenkit simply nodded back at me excitedly. "Yeah!"

Then, without wasting another moment, I let out a squeal and practically leaped out of our moss nest. "Then what are we waiting for?" I then exclaimed before picking up Wrenkit in my jaws and bursting out of the den. "Let's go see Sandstorm and her kits!"

Wrenkit was *mrrowing* with laughter and I then pelted across camp, feeling as if I was running on air with this exciting news that I'd just been told. Luckily, the camp was fairly empty with cats either still asleep or gone on patrol – which was good, considering my excitement was practically sending me forward without me thinking to look in either direction.

Sure, I had known that Sandstorm was expecting for a little while now, and I had been so excited to hear that one of my new closest friends in this Clan was going to be in the nursery *with* me. *And our kits will be able to spend time together!* I then realized as I ran across camp. *It seriously is so nice to have these kinds of things I look forward to...*

I then had to suppress a purr as I thought about Wrenkit, who was warming my heart as she continued to laugh in my jaws. And luckily for those new kits, any cat would feel honored to be friends with this little one, I thought as I was filled with gratitude and pride. She is already growing up to become so kind, thoughtful, witty, curious, and bright. A bit shy, but there's nothing wrong with

that.

I genuinely always felt so thankful that I could fully enjoy raising her, and I couldn't help but wonder if where she was being raised, along with who *wasn't* helping me raise her had something to do with it, however, that wasn't worth thinking about. Wrenkit was the most amazing cat to me, and I was just glad that she was becoming the cat that she was.

And now, she'll have friends! I then thought excitedly. *I wonder how many... and will they be toms or she-cats?*

Hardly being able to stand the wait anymore, I practically skidded to a stop in front of the nursery, gently putting Wrenkit down as she continued to purr with amusement. "I'm glad I asked you to come with me!" she meowed with laughter in her voice. "We got here in double the time!"

"Well, what do you expect when you give me news like that?" I replied warmly to Wrenkit, exchanging a glance with her before gesturing my tail towards the medicine den entrance. "After you!"

That was all of the self-control I had managed to muster up; after my daughter trotted into the den, I was right on her tail as we both went through the bramble screen that would shield us from the outside.

As soon as I made my way into the den, I saw Wrenkit running eagerly deeper into the den, and heard her let out a gasp. "Oh my goodness, mother, look!"

I then gasped myself once my gaze followed Wrenkit's, where I immediately saw Sandstorm lying in a moss nest, with Firestar right at her side. As sweet as this was on its own, I wanted to melt into the ground below as I then noticed the two little bundles that were pressed into the she-cat's side – a dark ginger one and a light ginger tabby one.

And I was simply staring at them in awe once Sandstorm noticed the new visitors. "Hi, Mistpelt!" She then nodded to Wrenkit and flicked one of her ears with her tail. "And hello, little one.

Welcome!"

I then found myself shaking my head in amazement. "Hey, you two! I hope it's alright that we're here." I then flicked my tail sheepishly towards my daughter. "Wrenkit told me the news..."

I then purred as Sandstorm seemed to exchange an amused glance with Firestar. "Of course it's alright that you're here!" she replied kindly to me, to my relief. "It's about time these two start to get acquainted with their Clanmates, and maybe..."

She then nodded her head towards the wide-eyed Wrenkit. "...future best friends?"

As Wrenkit then let out an excited squeal, I exchanged a warm glance with Sandstorm. "Aw, I have no doubt," I purred as affection welled up in my heart. I then took a few pawsteps forward so that I could get a closer look at ThunderClan's newest members. "Well, they're both beautiful. Both she-cats?"

Firestar gave me a nod, his green eyes gleaming. "Yes, they are. ThunderClan's leader is going to have to learn how to be a father to two she-cats!" He then glanced affectionately down at Sandstorm. "And if either of them are like this one, then it's going to be quite an experience."

As I let out a *mrrow* of laughter, Sandstorm gave a large roll of her emerald eyes. "You're hilarious," she then muttered. "If ThunderClan's leader can't handle raising two she-cats, then I'm not sure how he got chosen as ThunderClan's leader. Anyway..."

The light ginger she-cat then nodded to me, laughter in her voice as she then said, "Yes, Mistpelt, both she-cats."

I simply nodded to the she-cat in reply, for a moment, actually having to push down a bit of jealousy as I stared at my two Clanmates and their kits. And for a moment, I so desired this perfect picture that I was staring at – a happy couple with their kits, and a new mother that was likely certain that her mate was going to be there for her, and help her raise her kits to the best of his ability. *That what I wanted, and what I wished to have since I first saw how*

amazing my parents were together, but...

I then tried my best to let the envy run its course, and then become absent in my mind completely. *But having that mate does not determine my having a happy family. I don't need that, and clearly...* I then stared lovingly down at Wrenkit, who was looking at Sandstorm's kits thoughtfully. *I haven't needed that. This is all that I need.*

I then raised my eyebrows with intrigue as Wrenkit began to speak. "Do they have names yet?" she asked kindly, her head tilted to the side.

Firestar let out a little purr as he nodded to Wrenkit. "As a matter of fact, they do!" he meowed as he then flicked his tail towards the dark ginger kit. "This one is Squirrelkit. See her long, fluffy tail?" He then gestured to the light ginger tabby as Wrenkit nodded eagerly. "And this one is Leafkit."

I found myself shaking my head in amazement once again. "Both amazing names, really," I purred to them as I started intently at the two kits. "They seem to suit them well!"

"I agree! I do have a question though..." Wrenkit then mewed, causing both Sandstorm and Firestar to raise their eyebrows with interest. "You said you named Squirrelkit for her fluffy tail, so why is Leafkit named Leafkit?"

Wrenkit then excitedly padded closer to Sandstorm as she exchanged a glance with Firestar and then leaned in closer to my daughter, her gaze sparkling. "Well, actually, she's named after the leader of the Clan we met on our journey!"

I then blinked in surprise as I recalled said journey that Firestar and Sandstorm had just arrived from half a moon ago. As crazy as it had sounded to me, Firestar had been given a mission to put together a long lost Clan that had been known as SkyClan – a Clan that had practically disappeared long before any cats alive now were born.

And when I say that the two ThunderClan cats literally built and rebuilt a Clan – that is exactly what they did, and they hadn't left

until they were sure that this new SkyClan could hold their own.

The whole thing was incredible to me, and I could be certain that this new leader of SkyClan – who I knew to be named Leafstar – would have loved to know about this kit that was named after her. "Aw, I'm sure she would have been so honored to hear about that," I then said to my two Clanmates out loud. "Do you think you'll ever see her again and get to tell her that you named your daughter after her?"

Sandstorm immediately let out a snort. "Give me about six moons, and then I'll get back to you on that!"

"Maybe you can come with us the next time we go, Mistpelt," Firestar then purred. "I'm sure you miss getting on your paws every once in a while?"

I nodded to the ThunderClan leader as I gave a sigh and rolled my eyes. "Oh, you have no idea!" I replied to the flame-colored tom honestly, of course, having nothing but fond memories of that time in my life. *But so far, that also applied to this amazing place,* I then told myself. *Which is why staying in one place is so easy this time around.* "But at the same time, there really is no place I'd rather be!"

However, after thinking for another moment, I couldn't help but give a small shrug. "But I'm never opposed to a little journey!" I went on enthusiastically. "What was SkyClan like?"

"Oh, they truly are a wonderful, resilient group of cats," Firestar told me, his eyes glowing with awe as he shook his head slowly. "They all came from different places, but all seemed to come together so beautifully in that gorge."

"Oh, I agree!" Sandstorm then meowed, shifting a bit to better allow Squirrelkit and Leafkit to suckle. "I still am not even sure if any of the new members are descendants of the original Clan, and I guess we'll never know for sure."

I raised my eyebrows as I exchanged a fascinated glance with Wrenkit. "Well, goodness! Is there any way you'd even be able to tell?"

Firestar seemed to ponder the question for a moment before answering. "Well, from what I've been told, the original SkyClan was somewhat like ThunderClan – tree lovers and tree climbers, but they took it to another level," he then began to explain. "Climbing trees... climbing in general was almost instinctual to them – those long limbs they apparently had would make it easy."

For a moment, I couldn't even speak as I simply processed Firestar's words – his descriptions of these cats being oddly resonate. *I mean, any cat can learn to climb or be good at it, but...* I thought. *I still can't help but wonder.*

But despite my deep thoughts, I simply gave the leader a nod. "I see! Very neat," I purred.

I then simply watched as Wrenkit continued to stare at the kits, her beautiful hazel eyes wide with curiosity and awe. I could tell that she was over-the-moon excited, but she was trying her best to stay calm and quiet as to not alarm the kits. *But she's still showing so much excitement and curiosity,* I thought warmly, almost feeling overwhelmed by just how wonderful my daughter was, and how much of a joy she was. *And why would there be any doubt that I need any other cat other than her?*

I then flicked my ears, suddenly concerned and alarmed as I seemed to hear fast pawsteps coming from outside the den, and closer to where I knew the camp entrance was.

I then exchanged a worried glance with Wrenkit as I then recognized Cloudtail's voice ring through the clearing. "Firestar! Is Firestar in camp?"

I looked over my shoulders back at Firestar to see him flicking his own ears, his green ears flashing with concern. "Uh, oh," he murmured before then glancing at Sandstorm and touching his nose to her ear. "I'll be right back."

I then watched as he trotted past me, quickly heading towards the bramble screen and making his way through it. "Hopefully."

I then narrowed my eyes as I stared at the place that Firestar's

ginger tail disappeared, and I immediately knew that there was no way that, in this instance, that I would be able to stay put. "Hm... interesting."

I then looked over my shoulder back at Sandstorm. "I'll also be right back..." I murmured before beginning to also pad out of the den. "Coming, Wrenkit!"

Behind me, I heard my sweet daughter let out a little squeal before then hearing her light pawsteps follow behind me. "Of course!"

As the two of us then walked through the bramble screen exit, I found that I was more than eager to know what the racket was all about. Luckily, I didn't have to wait long.

Almost immediately once Wrenkit and I got deeper into the clearing, I saw many worried ThunderClan cats gathering towards the camp entrance as Cloudtail, Dustpelt, Ashfur, and Thornclaw burst through – all looking very out of breath.

Firestar was already there to meet them. "What happened?" he asked, his voice impressively calm, as always. "Are you all okay?"

Dustpelt was the first to speak, letting out a huff first and giving a lash of his tail. "Well, I guess as good as a warrior can be after seeing a Twoleg on our territory."

Cloudtail then began to shift his paws back and forth. "...or three..."

Gasps spread throughout the camp, my daughter beside me included, as alarm suddenly washed over Firestar's face. "*What? Three* Twolegs on our territory?" he pressed, his voice rising slightly. "What were they doing?"

Ashfur then stepped forward after giving his fur a shake. "It was so weird," he began to explain to the leader. "They were just standing around and looking at the grass and trees as if they were the most fantastic things on earth."

The gray-speckled tom then paused for just a moment, narrowing his eyes as he seemed to try and recall something. "It was around Tallpines – luckily a bit far out from camp, but..." He then let out a

huff. "Still..."

"I'd say that it doesn't matter *where* they were on our territory," Dustpelt then cut in. "They were still on our territory, and they were about to snatch up Thornclaw if we hadn't bolted away as quickly as we did!"

The camp was filled with gasps all over again with the light brown tom's words. Firestar just continued to look bewildered – clearly the Clan had never dealt with a problem like this. "What? How?"

"Well, he was peeking at them just like the rest of us were, but..." Dustpelt then narrowed his eyes, flashing the golden brown tabby tom a look. "I guess he was a little closer and a little curioser than the rest of us. So, he was the first cat that the furless idiots noticed when they looked our way, and they immediately tried to grab him."

Thornclaw, who I now noticed to be the most out of breath, began to shake his head as Dustpelt told the story. "I don't know *what* they would have done with me, and I don't want to know, but..." He then let out an exhausted sigh. "Thank StarClan I acted fast."

"Thank StarClan, indeed," Firestar breathed as he also shook his head. "I'm glad that you and the rest of the patrol are okay."

"*For now*," Cloudtail then nearly hissed. "What are we meant to do about this? We've never had this problem before, and I can't imagine it stops here."

Firestar sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. "Unfortunately, I agree," he then muttered, giving one worried glance towards the medicine den where his mate and new kits were. "Well, all we can do for now is stay cautious and keep an extra eye out on patrols. If they get deeper into our territory or seem to pose a threat, we'll figure out a plan from there."

Dustpelt simply snorted, brushing past the ThunderClan leader and padding away. "Wow, I feel so much better."

Firestar watched the tom go for a moment before shaking his head

and facing the rest of his Clan once again. "I'll have Graystripe send out another patrol later today to check the territory around Tallpines." He then nodded to his deputy, his gaze sharp. "A bit of a bigger one, just in case they run into trouble, please."

Graystripe gave his friend and leader a sharp nod in return. "You got it!"

I then watched, briefly exchanging another nervous glance with Wrenkit as Graystripe then began to select who will be sent on this patrol – also praying to StarClan that this patrol would find a clear and safe ThunderClan territory.

I almost wished that I could be on this patrol to see what was going on, and to possibly figure out what these Twolegs were up to. I had to admit – I maybe knew a bit more about Twolegs than these Clan cats did, especially when they seemed to want to avoid them at all costs. *Understandably*... However, there was no way that I was going to try and leave camp right now, especially with how absent I had been when I first arrived here.

I then looked lovingly back down at Wrenkit. There are way more important things that I need to take care of.

While the thought of being here and doing things to more directly serve ThunderClan would mean a lot to me in the future, raising this wonderful she-cat was my only priority, and I couldn't *wait* for the moons to come. I also hoped with all of my heart that this Twoleg trouble was nothing, and that it wouldn't intrude on that in any way...

Chapter 27

[image]

The full moon was shining bright in the sky above the ThunderClan camp, the moonlight brightening the nursery as I peered my head past its entrance, watching as my Clanmates began to disappear through the gorse tunnel, leaving our home for the night.

And yet again, I had to push back my desire and antsy paws, wanting to so badly to join my new friends as they left for their Gathering – the same place that the BloodClan battle had been fought in, and the same place where I would have potentially been able to witness the truce that occurred between the four Clans.

Of course, since the battle, I had been more than curious to see what the dynamic of the four different groups would be like since they had all fought to the death together. However, unfortunately, I knew that I wouldn't be doing this for at least four more moons.

I couldn't help but let out a long sigh at this thought. *Ah, well...* I then said to myself. *Even if it's not now, at least I know it will come some day.*

And I continued to try to stand tall and lift my own spirits as I then saw a flame-colored pelt appear out of the corner of my eye, and I gave a flick of my tail in greeting to Firestar as I saw him pass by the nursery.

He almost simultaneously noticed me, returning my nod in greeting with kind green eyes. "Goodnight, Mistpelt," the ThunderClan leader meowed, raising his tail in farewell.

I nodded back. "You too, Firestar." *Please don't have too much fun, for my sanity.*

Biting back those last words, I simply blinked as the flame-colored tom gave me another farewell flick of his tail, then joined the rest of the Clan, him being the last one to leave. And as his ginger tail

disappeared through the gorse tunnel, I sighed and finally turned around and padded back into the nursery.

And, of course, as soon as I walked in, all of my problems, frustrations, and worries seemed to all be incompetent as my eyes immediately fell on Wrenkit's brown tabby-and-white pelt.

She had been trying to fall asleep once I'd began my cat-watching session, and now it appeared as if she'd finally been successful – her small flank slowly rising up and down, and her beautiful hazel eyes closed and covered with her tail.

I let out a quiet purr as I then trotted forward, calmly joining my daughter in our moss nest and wrapping myself around her. And almost immediately, my heart felt like it suddenly grew three sizes as Wrenkit almost seemed to sense that I was now beside her, letting out a sweet purr and nestling her little body deep into my flank.

I shook my head, almost in amazement, as I took a moment to bend my head down and give Wrenkit a gentle lick on the head, figuring and *hoping* that the she would get a full night's sleep. She'd had a pretty exciting day full of exploring the camp, and even having a chance to spend plenty of time playing with Leafkit and Squirrelkit. While a simple day, for a kit, I knew that was enough.

And as she continued to fall deeper into sleep, I couldn't help but simply watch her as I waited to grow drowsy myself. And as I watched her, I still found that I was overwhelmed with love for the tiny little scrap – *it's impossible to feel anything less,* I then thought. *No wonder Chrissy and Sparrow lost their minds whenever I did something even remotely dangerous...*

I then found myself pulling Wrenkit just a bit closer to me, simply letting my eyes close with my head still upright as I tried to bask in the silence that had now spread across the ThunderClan camp, with Wrenkit's breathing being the only noise that occupied the nursery.

Typically, there would be several other sleeping cats here by this time, but making me feel more antsy and lonely was the fact that Sandstorm and her two kits were not in the nursery. Conveniently,

earlier that day, Leafkit had been trying to take a nap in her side of the moss nest in the nursery, but was surprised to instead be lying down in a nest of *thorns*.

Sandstorm and Firestar actually came to find out that the placement of these thorns was no phenomenon, and actually, Squirrelkit had been the one to put them there, to my complete amusement. *And it is situations like this where I have to admit that I am so thankful that Wrenkit doesn't have a sibling.*

Sandstorm had immediately taken Leafkit to the medicine den, and was still in there with her as Cinderpelt tried her best to pull out all of the thorns and make sure Leafkit wasn't more severely punctured anywhere. And, of course, Squirrelkit was having to watch the entire process as she basked in her guilt.

So, with that, it was just me and Wrenkit in the nursery tonight. That had felt lonesome enough.

But now that ThunderClan was gone for the Gathering, an assembly between all four Clans, I felt more alone than ever. Of course, Wrenkit was all that I needed to feel like I had company, but now that she was asleep that of course wasn't an option for me.

So, now, the camp was quiet, and I couldn't hear any scampering from the clearing. The nursery was completely silent as I continued to sit there with my daughter.

And actually, it wasn't long after I lied down in the nest with Wrenkit that I also felt my head begin to lower down in the nest, and I felt myself beginning to drift off into sleep. *Good*, I told myself as I then felt my lids begin to lower. *Time to sleep this weird night off, and look forward to hearing the news of the Gathering in the morning.*

And conveniently, surely just heartbeats before I fully fell asleep, my restless brain seemed to almost be looking for something to keep me awake, and I felt as if I *had* to lift my head as what seemed like a strange scent flooded through my nose.

I narrowed my eyes and gaped my mouth open, listing off possibilities in my head of what the heck this could be.

It certainly couldn't be any Clan cat - it wouldn't make any sense, I would think. Clan cats would either be gathered at Fourtrees or guarding their camps. And if some stray Clan cat was for some reason wandering on our territory, it would be pretty stupid of them to do so.

And it didn't smell like a rogue or kittypet either – I certainly would be able to detect that.

And, fortunately, I could also be certain that it wasn't any kind of BloodClan or Twolegplace cat – it would be quite bold of them to show themselves her right now.

And as I crossed off all of these possibilities, I couldn't help but narrow my eyes and tilt my head in confusion. *That means...* I thought nervously, *this is some other creature. But what is it? A fox? A badger?*

I sniffed again and stood up in my nest. *Wait a moment...*

"Mother?"

I then flinched and gasped with surprise, which was then followed with a frustrated groan as I realized that my franticness had woken Wrenkit up.

And I looked back down at her to meet her wide, worried hazel eyes. "What's the matter?"

I didn't immediately reply, my attention abruptly brought back to the scent as another strong gust of it flooded through my nostrils.

And then, as I *finally* realized what it was that I was smelling, I still didn't answer. I couldn't, as I was suddenly overwhelmed with fear.

To my dismay, it was something that was completely familiar to me, just something that I'd had the fortune of not smelling for quite a long time, and something that I'd hoped that I'd never smell again, even after ThunderClan first noticed them on our territory. *A Twoleg!*

I began to shiver with fear, knowing that a Twoleg could be as

scary or dangerous as any furry creature. And, of course, it was hitting me like the biggest Twoleg truck that this meant that these idiotic Twolegs that had been spotted around Tallpines had finally decided to make their way deeper into our territory.

And what could a Twoleg be doing in ThunderClan territory in the first place? I wondered to myself, unsheathing my claws and gritting my teeth together. I even felt a growl rising in my throat. *With brains as dense as theirs, what do they want with our forest?*

My heart began to beat faster as the scent continued to get stronger. I nearly held my breath as I realized I now could hear distant footsteps coming from behind the nursery where I had been resting.

With that, I stood up, still feeling Wrenkit's fearful gaze burning into my fur. The poor thing still hadn't received an answer to me, but formulating that answer was the last thing I felt I should do.

Right now, I had to protect her, and I had to warn the rest of ThunderClan!

But, before I could do that, or even move another muscle, I let out another gasp of alarm as the nursery's roof was suddenly ripped open.

And with the moonlight that now seemed to flood through the entire nursery, I felt my heart sink as time seemed to freeze.

I stared up wide-eyed to see that it was indeed a Twoleg that I'd been able to scent up until now, its horrifying hairless face staring down at me and my daughter.

And although I was used to the forest looming over me, this creature seemed as tall as any tree I'd ever passed.

And with the sight of it, I instinctively wrapped my tail tightly around my daughter and began to slowly back away towards where the nursery entrance had been – having no idea if I should run, or stay put in the hopes of it giving up and walking away.

But I had no time to make a decision when, without hesitation, the Twoleg reached in and grabbed me as if he had no care in the

world.

Suddenly, I was filled with more rage than I had felt since I had first come to ThunderClan as I scratched and clawed at the Twoleg, but it wouldn't let go no matter how hard I tried. Its grip seemed to become tighter and tighter the more that I fought. Then, as I had feared, the Twoleg reached down and grabbed my little kit. I almost felt my heart break as I heard her mewl with fear. *No!*

I hissed and attempted to rake my claws down the Twoleg's arm. *Let her go, you piece of fox-dung!* Shockingly, this Twoleg seemed to stupid that he didn't even seem phased by the clear pain that I was likely inflicting on his arm.

And as the Twoleg then began to pad away from camp with both me and Wrenkit in his grip, I attempted to whip my head around to see if I could call to any cat in the camp to come and help me, but to my dismay, I knew that I was already too late. Although I could hear the fearful yowls of some of my Clanmates, the ravine was already becoming lost to my view. *No, no, no!*

However, just moments later, I felt the smallest bit of hope when I then I saw two of my Clanmates, Brightheart and Sootfur, burst from the camp entrance, yowling and hissing as they got closer, but the Twoleg seemed to notice and broke into a run.

And, as I had already half-expected, that small bit of hope quickly disintegrated into nothing as Sootfur and Brightheart began to disappear from my sight too.

And although the Twoleg's grip was strong, I tried for one last time to wiggle myself free of its strong grip. "It's not worth it!" I yowled out, not even knowing if Brightheart and Sootfur could hear me anymore. "Save yourselves! I'll be okay!"

I growled with all of my might and continued to claw at the Twoleg, but became weak with exhaustion and grief as it carried both of us away from the ThunderClan forest.

It all seemed to happen within just a single blink of an eye.

Just moments ago I had been safe with my daughter in the ThunderClan nursery, and now, I was finding that none of the territory around me was familiar as the Twoleg padded very quickly through the forest.

On the other side of the Twoleg, Wrenkit was letting out fearful yowls that felt more painful to me than any physical wound I could ever receive, and I wished more than anything that I could slice this Twoleg's arm off and press my daughter right against my own flank once again.

"It's okay, sweetheart!" I shouted out to her, hoping to StarClan that I was telling the truth. "I'm right here!"

"Mother!" I then heard her call back, making my stomach practically feel hollow with dread and discomfort. "What's happening? Where are we going?"

"I don't know, Wrenkit," I replied with exasperation as I continued to weakly scratch back at the Twoleg, knowing very well at this point that it was a lost cause to try and get away. "But don't worry, I'm still here with you. It will be okay!"

"Okay," I then heard Wrenkit sigh, sounding just as exasperated as I was. I then flicked my ears as I heard her gasp. "What are those?"

"What are-" I then flicked my ears, cutting myself off as I looked ahead, gasping myself as I tried to process what was now in front of me.

And I felt my heart sink with dread as I recognized what I thought was two *very* large monsters that I'd only seen in the Twolegplace scarcely. The fronts of the monsters looked like any other, but their behinds were *significantly* larger, simply looking like a large rectangle-shaped box that was almost as large as a small Twoleg nest.

The backs of these rectangles were both wide open as they sat right next to each other, and the closer that the Twoleg brought us to them, the more quickly that my heart began to pound.

This was because I was sure that there was no way that this Twoleg was simply showing us his neat monsters. By the dozens of animal crates that I could see on the inside of these monsters, I could tell that he most definitely had other plans.

And I didn't like it at all. "No!" I then yowled at the top of my lungs as I began to scratch at the hairless creature with full force again. "You're going to regret snatching the two of us, I swear!"

But I also could swear that this Twoleg had had to carry cats like this before, as he seemed to not be phased no matter how much I tried to fight back. Clearly – he had a mission, and the other Twolegs that I was no noticing gathered around the two large monsters had the same one.

Wrenkit and I were carried over to one of the trucks. Now, we were close enough to where I was able to see inside.

What was inside? Well, it was nothing that surprised me. However, it didn't make me feel any less horrified with me being able to anticipate it.

I was now able to see that some of the crates in this monster were not empty.

And actually, I don't think I had ever felt so heartbroken at what I saw, which was several young cats and kits filling these crates, all of their eyes wide and so full of confusion and fright as they simply had to stand in the darkness, trapped.

And as all of this began to sink in, my sadness quickly turned to rage all over again as I realized what this meant.

And as I realized that there was now nothing that I could do to prevent it.

I began to hiss with indignancy as I felt the Twoleg's grip on me tighten significantly, and I could do nothing but flail like a maniac as Wrenkit suddenly came into my sight as the Twoleg stretched out the paw that held her in it.

Another Twoleg pelted forward and practically leaped into the large

monster, also ignoring me as he opened up the closest empty crate.

No!

Now, the Twoleg holding me was gripping me so hard that it was harder to yowl, and more difficult to breath, making sure that there was no way I could move as he then placed Wrenkit inside of the crate, quickly pulling his paw away as the other Twoleg shut it and locked it.

My heartbeat now seemed to be pulsing out of my ears as I watched Wrenkit scrambled around the cage, and I suddenly never had felt like more of a failure. I had never, ever hoped that Wrenkit would ever have to feel this much helplessness or fear in her life.

And there was nothing that I could do to fix it.

"Mother?" Wrenkit cried out. "Mother!"

And with my daughter's cries, I had truly never felt so guilty, terrified, or frightened as the Twoleg holding me then began to pad away in the opposite direction, pulling me farther away from the love of my life. "My love, I am so sorry!" I called out to Wrenkit, my voice now a full whimper as I continued to wriggle in the Twoleg's grip. "I will come back for you and find you! I promise!"

Already, Wrenkit felt like an entire earth's distance away by the time that the Twoleg stepped out of the rectangle monster. "Until then," I then practically wheezed out to my daughter, "Stay alive!"

Then, it felt as if my entire world was cut off from me as the door to the back of the monster was suddenly shut, the last thing I'd been able to see from the inside being my daughter's frightened hazel eyes staring back at me.

Chapter 28

[image]

The scent of the forest lingered in the air, a cruel reminder of the life I was being ripped away from as I was pulled away from the large monster that I knew my daughter was shut inside.

I actually managed to feel the smallest twinge of happiness, knowing full well that I was giving the Twoleg that was carrying me a hard time. His grunts of struggle were obvious, and his grip seemed to loosen just a bit as I practically went berserk – yowling until I gave myself a headache, and my unsheathed claws slashing in every possible direction.

A cat or any other creature on earth would think that I was losing my mind, which I had to admit wasn't far from the truth. Being ripped away from what I felt was my true home had been horrible enough, but that suddenly felt as inadequate as the smallest mosquito once Wrenkit had been put in that cage – a cage that I already knew was going to be separate from wherever I was going.

And I continued to fight – as useless as I knew it would be – when sure enough, the idiot Twoleg that still had me in his paws began to carry me towards the other large monster. And almost just as rapidly as the Twolegs had done with my daughter, they opened up a cage in the other monster, and didn't give me even a half of a heartbeat to try and escape as they practically threw me inside.

I then almost felt as if I was being struck by lightning as I heard the bang of the cage shutting, following by what I was sure was them locking it shut. It had the same effect – resulting in my fur bristled out, my bones weak, and my heart practically stopping.

I was trapped.

And when the large, heavy door at the back of the monster closed shut, its noise echoing like it could spread through the whole earth, my last bit of hope disappeared.

And I practically felt numb with shock as I let myself sink down to the frigid floor of the tiny encapsulation, the equally cold air seeming to dig deep down under every single piece of fur that I had. And my mind seem to be swirling with every single negative thought and simultaneously with absolute nothingness as the monster then began to move, all of the other metal cages quivering as the vehicle shook back and forth.

The journey was a tumultuous ride, each bump and jolt a painful echo of the distance growing between ThunderClan and me. For the entirety of the travel, all I felt I could do was stand there, my legs sprawled out, my claws unsheathed, and my fur bristling out so much that it was brushing against the walls of the cage as I just stared ahead at the void of complete darkness.

And with how eternal the ride felt, with the sounds of the quivering cages, the rumbling of the monster, the bumps that it made that sometimes brought me to be airborne, and the darkness around me, I honestly felt as if I was dying, or that I might as well be dead.

In fact, this felt like a fate *worse* than death.

However, I managed to somewhat snap out of my complete dejection once I felt the monster come to what felt like a complete stop, causing my unsheathed claws to uncomfortably scrape against the cage floor.

And after waiting a few more moments, I could now be sure that the truck had now come to a full halt.

I had no idea how to feel about this. Because no matter what, right at this moment, I had no idea what would be waiting for me outside of this monster.

I then found myself letting out a hiss, my eyes quickly shutting as I then was practically blinded by the Twolegs opening up the back of the monster once again, an overwhelming amount of sunlight breaking through, and exposing me to the harsh reality outside.

Then, the Twolegs from before seemed to burst in there as quickly as if *they* were the ones that were being held captive, several of

them sprinting into the monster's belly and grabbing cages – cats looking just as angry, fearful, or confused as I was trapped within the small bars.

It didn't take long at all for one of the Twolegs to make their way to where I was, where they found me hissing still, my fur still fluffed out to full capacity as I pressed myself against the back of the cage.

And I felt sick as I briefly met the gaze of the Twoleg, his eyes looking as apathetic as they would be if he were to be staring off at the sky at nothing.

And the sight probably brought me to retaliate just as much as I initially planned as he gripped onto my cage with both paws and began to carry me out of the truck. I didn't have much to work with now that I wasn't directly being carried, but I tried with all of my might to scratch at his paws that I now had direct access to.

But although the Twoleg seemed to wince and let out some grunts of pain every once in a while, my efforts seemed to go to nothing. And realizing this, I suddenly felt that all I could do was stand in that cage, staring up at the Twoleg in complete bewilderment. *How?* I then thought to myself. *How can you possibly do this to me – take me and so many other cats away from their home, and see them yowl and fight, and act as if you don't care?*

I then couldn't help but let out another hiss and slash at one of the Twoleg's paws one last time. *How can you rip me away from my daughter and expect her to fend for herself? Let your other Twolegs hurt her?*

I then truly felt like I was losing my mind when within I split heartbeat, I went from feeling pure shock and betrayal to pure helplessness and sadness - sinking down to the cold floor of the cage and beginning to whimper into my paws. *How could you leave a mother to worry about her?*

I then whipped my head back up after a few moments, forcing myself to stand up as I then frantically looked around, trying to look more closely at the other cages being carried around me. *Oh, Wrenkit, where are you?*

Although I'd already been pretty sure before I started looking, I was almost immediately disappointed to find absolutely no cat that looked like my daughter. In fact, it was clear to me pretty quickly that all of the other cats around me all looked at *least* my age, and older.

Clearly, the kits and the older cats were meant to be separated, and were being taken to separate places.

For the hundredth time within the last quarter of the day, I found a violent growl rising in my throat once again as I glanced back up at the Twoleg carrying my cage. *Great StarClan...* I then brooded. *How?*

Then feeling another wave of anger, I practically threw myself at the top of my cage as I attempted to shred the Twoleg's paws once again, feeling *numb* with rage at the thought that this furless idiot likely knew where my daughter was, and I did not.

And again, the Twoleg only showed the smallest signs of fear and resistance as he stepped through a doorway, the sunlight disappearing behind me as I was carried inside of a building – something I had hoped I would never do again once I left BloodClan.

But here I was, the cold air and weird stench of the indoors striking me like a lion's claws as the Twoleg walked deeper into the nest. Twoleg voices now overwhelmed my ears, and the scents of cats and other animals were flooding into my nose. Simply the fact that it was all so unfamiliar made me feel nauseous.

The Twoleg then took me through another doorway that brought me into an area that was just as loud and scent-filled as the last one, but now, I was staring ahead at what looked like a glorified version of the truck full of cages I had just been in.

And by glorified, I simply mean that it was an area full of cages that wasn't a moving monster in complete darkness.

And also, the cats that filled the cages didn't look scared at all. Sure, there seemed to be the rare one or two that clearly hated the tight

space, but several of them had clearly become acclimated to whatever this situation was, simply snoozing in their cages, grooming themselves, or enjoying some food or a drink.

I'll have whatever they're having.

I then let out a gasp, letting all four of my unsheathed claws grip the cage floor again as I felt myself being lifted higher off of the ground, and then violently pressed against one of the open cages that was in the room.

I knew exactly what this idiot Twoleg expected me to do, and this was his strategic way of him getting me out of this idiot cage without him having to touch me.

He sure was lucky for that.

And he also was lucky that I wanted to get as far away from *him* as possible, and that at this moment, *anything* sounded better than being trapped in the cage that he was carrying me in.

So, I moved forward, carefully taking steps out of the cage I'd been carried here in, and into the much more stable cage that was pressed up against the wall of this room.

I then barred my teeth, letting out another ruthless hiss as I felt the cold paw of the Twoleg push me deeper into the enclosure before violently slamming the small door shut behind me and locking it.

And truthfully, I have absolutely no idea for how long I stood in that idle position that the Twoleg had left me in after closing the case, where I simply stared at the silver wall in front of me, which was filled with slightly lighter squares where light from the room behind me leaked through the cage bars.

And soon, where the light from the early sunrise outside leaked through the cage bars.

Sure, I could have spent all of this time trying to find a way to escape, which I suppose I eventually would.

But weirdly, while that was the first thing on my mind, it almost

simultaneously seemed to be my last.

That is because the fact that my daughter had been ripped away from me, and the fact that *both* of us had been ripped away from our home, was at the forefront of my mind.

I was so full of shock, fear, and anger that at that fact that I felt like I couldn't move. That I needed to take the time to fully reconstruct my mind and my reality.

Nothing else about my existence seemed to matter. I hadn't eaten for at least half of a day, and I was probably starving; I hadn't gone for a drink of water since sunhigh yesterday, and was probably thirsty; I of course hadn't bothered to groom myself since the disaster had occurred, and my bristled fur was probably tangled and sticking in every which direction.

And sure, while there was a food bowl full of gross slop, a small bowl of water, and now all the time in the world to groom myself, none of that seemed to be anything that mattered right now. I was so full of so much denial and numbness that I couldn't even think about basic survival.

The last time that I had felt even remotely like this was when Chrissy and Sparrow had been killed, and then when I had witnessed Scourge kill Tigerstar. At least in those instances, I got to choose how to cope with those situations, whether it was in a good or bad way.

But in this situation, I was simply stuck with my grief-stricken thoughts, with nowhere to go, nowhere to run, and absolutely *no one* around me to console me. Surely even StarClan was distant from a place like this.

And like I said, I honestly have no idea how long I spent simply staring at that cage wall, slowly watching it change color as the night and day moved along outside as I tried not to fully break down and whimper like the most insane cat in the entire world to all of the cats in here that surely were trying to sleep.

For a while, the rising daylight was my only indication that time

was actually passing until I flinched by the loud bang of a door opening at the other end of the room, followed by the heavy footsteps of what sounded like several Twolegs walking in.

And actually, the curiosity overpowering me as it always did, I actually managed to bring myself to turn around, facing the side of the cage that I'd entered from and padding up closer to it.

Almost immediately, I was able to notice what looked like a younger female Twoleg leading an older pair of Twolegs deeper into the room. All three of them seemed to be speaking in such joyful, excited tones that made me sick, and all three of their sets of eyes were wide and bright with awe as they looked around.

I then froze as they began to pass by my area, and I felt my fur begin to rise once again and prickle with fear as the younger female Twoleg slowly came to a stop, seeming to look back expectantly at the couple behind her.

It was then that I realized that it more seemed to be the two of them that were looking around more actively, their gazes still excited but also contemplative as their eyes seemed to rest on individual cages for long periods of time. *But... why?*

I then flicked my ears, having to try with all of my might to hold back a shocked and indignant hiss as I swiftly and quietly made my best attempt to back all the way up to the very back of my cage. *No...*

I hadn't given myself the capacity to put the pieces together before or to fully acknowledge it, however, thanks to my time in the Twolegplace, I knew exactly what kind of place this was that I had been put in.

An animal shelter. *More like an animal torture chamber.*

Twolegs thought that they were being saints by putting any animals that they found in these cages in these places, giving them food, water, and somewhere somewhat warm to live and sleep.

But apparently animals couldn't live like this forever, and while

several of them could stay in these shelters for a long while, the Twolegs that run these places are fully under the assumption that one day, these animals will be able to go on to a better life with Twolegs that chose to take them.

Twolegs that chose to take them.

As this continued to echoed in my head, I also continued to violently press myself against the back of the cage, anxiously watching as these Twoleg visitors partook in what I now knew was likely a search for their new cat to hold hostage in their home.

And as I also tried to stay as still as possible, I also prayed to StarClan harder than I ever had before (hopefully), praying to them that I would be ignored completely, and that I would be given time to one – be able to calm down and develop a sound mind and two, find how the heck I was going to make my escape.

But I guess I should have been a bit more specific with my prayer.

Because it sure seemed like StarClan was going to give me an escape – right here and right now.

Suddenly, it felt as if my entire world was collapsing around me once again when for the second time within this day, I made direct eye contact with a Twoleg that clearly was looking at me with a goal and an intention.

And my heart suddenly seemed to sink to the core of the earth when that female Twoleg I'd locked gazes with completely lit up at the sight of me. And as she then pulled her male Twoleg closer to her so that he also was looking at the cage, I knew that I was doomed, and that I wasn't finding Wrenkit or my way home any time soon.

Chapter 29

[image]

I never realized that so many types of restraints for cats existed.

I was in a new one now - this one feeling smaller and more compact than the one I'd been carried to the animal shelter in, with only a few vertical holes for me to see out of, and caged bars only on one end of it. The bottom of it was cushioned, and I had to admit that it felt incredibly soft on my paws – maybe even a bit softer than grass or moss.

But of course, that didn't matter to me at all or bring me any comfort. The fact that I was in this confined space, being carried by two Twolegs that for some reason found it *exciting* to claim ownership of a cat that had been ripped away from its home and from its daughter, filled me with nothing but anger.

And for the second time that day, I'd had to endure another ride in a monster, luckily, this one a little less shaky, and not nearly as dark.

But of course, that didn't matter to me at all or bring me any comfort. The fact that I was in this confined space, being carried by two Twolegs that for some reason found it *exciting* to claim ownership of a cat that had been ripped away from its home and from its daughter, filled me with nothing but anger.

And luckily, just like last time, the monster had come to a stop, and I was exposed to small slits of a view of the outside once again, small streaks of sunlight breaking through them and lighting my small space.

But of course, that didn't matter to me at all or bring me any comfort. The fact that I was in this confined space, being carried by two Twolegs that for some reason found it *exciting* to claim ownership of a cat that had been ripped away from its home and from its daughter, filled me with nothing but anger.

Can you tell I'm losing my mind a little?

And all I felt I could do at this point was continue to spiral downward, back in my original, malicious state as I yowled within my small confinement, attempting to fill up every single part of that cage with my scratches. Sure, I was hoping that I could scare the Twolegs and annoy them to death, but I also was trying to do everything that I could to get them to *hate* me and to get *rid* of me.

I'm not sure if they were on a mission to try and fix the most demonic and aggressive cat that they could find in the shelter, or assumed that I was just being hostile for the time being, but either way, they were stupid as heck for picking me.

But I probably looked stupid as heck to anyone that could see the scene occurring as I was carried by one of the Twolegs out of the monster. As far as I could tell – to my complete annoyance – these two furless mouth-breathers didn't seem to care that I was going berserk for the hundredth time today.

And as they opened their front door to their Twoleg nest and brought me inside, I let out a yowl, surprised as the cage landed hard on the ground, causing me to land on my back on the plush flooring. It appeared as if I had been set down.

I quickly scrambled to my paws, and I actually let out a gasp when almost simultaneously, the cage's door opened – representing what was supposed to be freedom, for some reason.

Well, I suppose receiving free reign to rip two Twolegs to shreds and then leave their dumpster of a nest would eventually lead to freedom.

Suddenly being filled with determination and excitement, I burst out of the cage, my claws already unsheathed and my teeth barred as a growl was rising in my throat.

It was time for a heathen to outsmart two other heathens.

I blinked in surprise when I couldn't immediately see the two Twolegs in front of me. And after whipping my head from side to

side, and *still* not seeing them, I practically threw myself to my side and pelted to the other end of the cage, assuming that they had been standing just behind my confinement.

So, one could imagine that I was immensely confused when I didn't see the two idiots on the other side either.

In fact, all I was able to spot was their front door, just before it shut all the way, and clicked closed.

And as the current situation hit me, I found myself trying to push down even more rising anger. And weirdly, this was the one instance where a Twoleg's absence infuriated me. *So, they snatch me away from my home, take me to this place, and then leave me here?* I thought with rage as my claws sank into the carpet below me. *Are they out of their minds?*

But luckily, it only took me a few heartbeats to calm down just a bit, take a deep breath, and realize what this situation *actually* meant. *Well, I know they're out of their minds,* I then told myself as I sniffed. *But they're especially out of their minds if they think they'll still find me here when they get back.*

Now, with a completely new mission, I whipped myself back around and flitted my eyes around the entirety of the room I was in – a living room, I could easily tell. Luckily my time in the Twolegplace had given me some idea of what was around me in a Twoleg nest – the large-looking fluffy cushions in the room, the carpet on my paws, and the weird, black box that was stuck to the wall made it obvious.

But all that mattered to me right now was the large window that was to the right of one of the large cushions.

And as I trotted excitedly over to where it was, I found that my gaze could now not look at anything else but this window – something that I knew could easily be my escape from this place.

With no problem at all, I was able to leap up to the window, which luckily had a wooden plank that jutted out from it that I could sit on. I then narrowed my eyes, now very intently looking for

anything that even slightly resembled a shiny-looking hook.

This is unfortunately because I knew that this was what I was supposed to look for, unfortunately because this is one of the many things that Scourge had taught me when I lived in BloodClan. Opening windows could be either an easy in to any Twoleg building, or a perfect, quick escape out of one. *And if I'm remembering correctly... ff any window has a hook in the middle of the pane, it should easily twist, and I can push the window pane up and slide through!*

My fur now tingling with excitement, I immediately gripped the hook with my teeth and began to tug it in my direction, like I had been taught. Up until this point, this had worked for me without fail.

So why the hook wasn't moving, I wasn't sure.

I found myself having to step away for a moment as my teeth began to ache. I then closed my eyes, lifted my head towards the ceiling, and let out a sigh. *And the hits just keep on coming.*

And after I took another moment to question StarClan and their choices, I gave a shake of my fur and then attempted to give it another go, but sadly, my hope was already swindling down fast.

And I gave up once again only after a few more moments, with me coming out of it this time hissing in frustration. *Goodness gracious, what is the deal?*

"Nice try. There's no way you're getting that window open."

I then let out another hiss, this time, in alarm at the lower voice that I heard behind me. I whipped myself around, easily being able to find my footing despite the small amount of space, my claws unsheathed and my heart racing as I watched a larger figure pad up to me from the floor below.

It was a cat, thank goodness, and it appeared to be a tom. He was a dark brown tabby with fur as long as mine, with ice blue eyes that seemed glitter with smugness and amusement.

I stared back at him through my own narrowed ice blue eyes. "Excuse me?" I called out to him, my fur slightly bristling at the sight of the stranger.

"That window isn't going to open," the tom repeated to me, his head shaking back and forth slowly. "Trust me, others have tried."

I simply stared back at the tom for a moment in bewilderment as I placed one of my paws on top of the metal hook. "I'm sorry, is this not the way to open a window?"

"It would be if it hadn't been fused shut."

I stared back at the tom in silence once again, this time, a little longer. "*Fused* shut?"

The dark brown tabby gave me a single nod. "You've got it."

"And why would anyone do that?" I then asked, my claws on that same paw unsheathing and wrapping themselves around the hook.

The stranger then let out a sniff. "Well, probably to try and avoid exactly what you're doing right now." I then rolled my eyes and held back a growl as he then sat down, wrapping his thick tail around his front paws. "Well, I think. I'm assuming you're trying to escape?"

I then let out a sigh through barred teeth. "You're so wise," I then muttered as I leapt down from the window, brushing past the tom and deeper into the Twoleg nest as soon as I made my landing.

I could feel the tom's gaze still on me as I then tried to take a peek into what I assumed was the kitchen. "Hm, so what's your next game plan?" he called out to me.

Even though he was behind me, I found myself lashing my tail back towards him dismissively. "Just give me a moment," I hissed back at him before deciding to pad quickly back over to the front door that I'd first been brought back in – my eyes immediately falling on its copper-colored knob. "Does this open?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"It locks from the inside," the tom replied as I heard his pawsteps begin to follow behind me.

"Geez," I growled in frustration as I then wandered around the living room frantically. I then took one last glance back at the door. "Maybe I can squeeze past the Twolegs when they come back and open the door?"

The tabby tom then let out a snort. "Good luck getting them not to notice that."

I then felt my eyes narrowing. "Well, they're clearly a little dense." Then, as I heard the tom purr with amusement, I looked back at the window I'd been at earlier.

My eyes further narrowed, and my tail began to lash with eagerness and curiosity. "Think I could smash that open with something?"

"Sure," the tom replied in a surprisingly nonchalant tone. I found out why just a heartbeat later – "If the glass was breakable."

You've got to be kidding me.

I slowly turned my head and looked over my shoulder, staring back at the tom even longer this time. *I'm going to lose my mind.* "There's glass that isn't breakable?"

"There is if you don't want anyone to break it."

I then proceeded to glare at the tom for a few moments, wondering if StarClan was just trying to humor me by spawning in a random cat who was just meant to make my life and my situation even more difficult than it already was. "I'm sorry – who are you?"

The tom purred as he sat down once again. "I'm surprised you want to know," he then meowed. "I've just been crushing your fun."

You've got that right. "Well, yeah, you have," I then said out loud. I then narrowed my eyes and gave a lash of my tail. "But I'm polite and ask for names."

The tom let out yet another *mrrow* of laughter as he shook his head. While he obviously wasn't in my situation, it for some reason infuriated me that he could possibly be so happy go-lucky right now. "I'm Wendell. If you couldn't tell, I live here and I know this house pretty well."

I simply gave him a nod before simply passing by him once again and continuing in my search, his gaze still on me. "Are you going to continue your politeness and introduce yourself?"

I only stopped in my pawsteps for a moment to sigh and roll my eyes. "Mistpelt."

"Lovely to meet you, Mistpelt," Wendell then purred, his head seeming to shake in amazement as I then continued to look at every single nook and cranny around me. "Now, why are you trying to get out of here?"

I paused once again, genuinely shocked as I turned around and faced the tabby tom. "Why are you *not*?"

Wendell shrugged as he gave a lash of his tail. "A roof on my head... food in my belly," he then meowed with laughter in his voice. "That's about all I need to keep me somewhere."

I sighed once again, closing my eyes for a moment. Considering some of the cats I've known and met in the past, I should have anticipated that answer. "To each their own," I breathed.

I then forced myself to sit down, taking a moment as I flicked my tail back towards the front door. "Did these idiots get you from a shelter too?"

"Sure did. Just a few seasons ago," Wendell replied, his gaze then quickly wiping over with intrigue. "So you came from the shelter?"

"Unfortunately," I muttered, physically shaking my head as I tried to get rid of the thoughts of it. "I was there for one night."

"Geez, only one night?" Wendell asked with wide eyes. "Impressive."

I let out another sigh. "I guess somehow Twolegs were still able to

see a pretty cat beyond its fit of rage."

I then cocked an eyebrow as Wendell let out a snort, and he looked at me from head to paws. "Well, I can't blame them for that." And after I let out a disgusted hiss and turned away from him once again, I then heard him meow, "Where were you before the shelter?"

I then couldn't help but longingly look back at the window that I now knew was... *unbreakable* – the window that should have led me back out to my home. "I come from the forest," I then sighed as I shook my head slowly. "If it wasn't obvious enough already, I was brought here against my will."

"Nah, *really?*" Wendell meowed to me, his eyes mockingly wide and his tone sarcastic. And after I rolled my eyes back at him, his eyes grew curious once again. "Wait, so you're one of those wild cats?"

"Definitely wanting to go a little wild right now..." I muttered.

Wendell then let out an amused purr, and then let out a fascinated grunt as he padded up closer to me. "So, are you one of those cats that lives in one of the big groups? That are vicious to any intruders and eat their prey whole?"

I couldn't help but let out a purr myself at the tabby tom's idea of what Clan cats were. *That's certainly not the picture Barley first painted for me...* I then had to shut my eyes for a moment as I had to fight back grief. *Gosh, I miss Barley already...*

I then shook my head quickly, pulling myself back to the present as I once again thought about Wendell's latest comment. "Goodness gracious. You're right about the first part... but I chew my food." After Wendell and I then managed to exchange a purr, I shook my head again and scanned my gaze around the living room. "But anyway, I want to get back to my *group* more than anything right now."

I then shut my eyes once again as an even bigger wave of grief hit me like a monster going at full speed. "Well, I want to once I find my daughter..."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wendell's eyes widen and his ears flick. "You have a *daughter*?" he asked me, sounding genuinely shocked. "What happened to her?"

I took a moment to take a deep breath and try to keep calm before answering the tom. "She was taken away when I was, but then we were separated," I eventually forced out as my eyes screwed shut. "Great *StarClan*, I hope she's okay..."

Then, as a growl began to rise in my throat and anger began to bubble up inside of me all over again, I found myself looking at that darned-window all over again. "And I hope that these Twolegs are prepared for their unbreakable glass to break."

My growl then released from my throat when Wendell grabbed my tail with his, stopping me from jumping back up to the window. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" he called to me in alarm. "Even if you did end up breaking that glass and escaping, you'll do so looking like a bloody mess!"

I then let out a frustrated sigh as I begrudgingly internally agreed with Wendell, and had to admit to myself that my grief and determination really was driving me mad. "Well then, *Wendell*, can you help me, for StarClan's sake?" I exasperatedly asked the tom. "Seriously, I've got a two moon old kit out there on her own, and every moment that I'm not with her is another moment that she has to be scared, trapped, and alone."

I then let my claws unsheathe and sink into the carpet once again. "I'd live my whole life that way myself if it meant I knew she was okay, but I don't," I then continued, my voice now hoarse with emotion. "So, for the love of everything, help me find a way out of here."

Wendell practically looked helpless as he gave me a shrug. "I'm sorry, Mistpelt. I can't."

With those words, I sunk my claws deeper into the floor and let my eyes narrow. "Okay, the jokes can stop now, Wendell."

"I wish I was joking," Wendell then sighed, giving another shrug as

he then began to scan his blue eyes around the room. "But remember what I said earlier? Do you really think you're the first cat that's tried to get out of here? For whatever reason, these housefolk love their cats, and have taken any means possible to keep them from getting out anymore."

I then felt my heart sink as his solemn gaze met mine once again. "I hate to say it, but I think you're meant to be here for the long haul."

Chapter 30

[image]

"Gosh darn-it!"

In this moment, it truly felt like nothing was more difficult as I lied on my back, my teeth barred as I dug into the horrible, annoying nuisance that was now wrapped around my neck. A *collar*.

The horrible, annoying nuisance Twolegs had luckily made it pretty loose, but I didn't care. Having a collar on my neck in any capacity made me feel like I was choking.

I had been on my back for what felt like the entire day, my front paws unsheathed and tucked under the small band. Several moments had already passed by where I thought I was *actually* going to choke myself from how hard I was pulling on it.

And I thought I was *actually* going to explode from how frustrated I was getting.

And seeing Wendell watching me out of the corner of my eye wasn't helping matters at all.

"Still going at it?" he asked me, his voice full of laughter as he gave an amused lash of his tail.

For some reason, his amusement brought me to want to push against my collar even harder. "Of course!" I growled through my gritted teeth. Gosh, how did Scourge ever have tolerated having that collar with dog teeth?

I only paused to ponder that for a moment before continuing in my strife. Well, I guess that was one of the reasons he was out of his mind.

"Mistpelt, I hate to break it to you," Wendell then meowed, breaking into my thoughts, "but I think this is a fight with an inanimate

object that you're going to lose."

"Foxdung!" I barked back at the dark tabby tom.

I then paused once again, slowly looking over at the kittypet as I narrowed my pale blue eyes back at his. "Hey – you have claws that are in a much better position than mine... wanna *help* me!?"

Wendell immediately let out a snort and shook his head, to my disappointment and annoyance. "My claws would fall off before I could even make a nick in it."

With that, I let out a frustrated huff and returned to my battle with an... *inanimate object* once again, pushing harder than I ever had, and honestly not caring if my claws fell off. "I should have known you'd be a buzzkill," I muttered back at Wendell.

"Please!" the tom then meowed, his head shaking slowly and his eyes gleaming. "If I wasn't here with you in this house, I think you would have ripped yourself to shreds by now."

Even if he was right, there was no *way* that I was going to agree with him out loud. "Whatever," I muttered instead.

Out of my peripheral, I could now see Wendell rolling his eyes and then walking over in my direction until he was practically hovering over me, his eyes still gleaming. "Will you ever give up?"

At the tom's words, I actually found myself letting out a sigh and finally letting myself go fully limp. "I don't know..." I breathed as I then rolled over so that I was lying on my stomach. "All I know is that I *hate* wearing it, and if I manage to escape while I'm wearing it, I'm sure another Twoleg will snatch me up thinking I'm a house cat."

Above me, Wendell barred his own teeth and let out a sheepish hiss. "Again, I hate to break it to you..."

I once again narrowed my eyes back at the tom, letting my claws unsheathe and sink into the carpet below me. "I am *not* a housecat," I insisted to the tom right before standing up. "And I'll eventually get this collar off."

"Aw, come on, you look cute with it," Wendell purred, causing me to roll my eyes. I then slightly cringed back as he gave me a flick on the ear with his tail. "The light blue collar really brings out your eyes..."

I continued to stare at the tabby tom through narrowed eyes, not sure how genuine or sarcastic those comments were. Either way, I replied with sarcasm. "Aw, thank you. Now I *really* want to keep it on."

I then found that I was actually having to hold back a purr as Wendell let out a *mrrow* of laughter at my comment. For some reason, I felt like I was giving into this life or into this place if I decided to stroke the tom's ego even a *little* bit by admitting that he actually did cheer me up sometimes. *Anyways, what's the point of establishing any of that when I'm going to leave soon?*

But almost immediately, Wendell's words from only days ago echoed into my head. I hate to say it, but I think you're meant to be here for the long haul.

I shut my eyes for a moment, shaking my head as if to get rid of the thought, and then let out a sigh as I began to pad out of the living room in search for something that would even bring me a *mouse-tail's* amount of happiness. "I'm going out to the backyard."

I could immediately hear Wendell's pawsteps moving behind me. "Following."

With that response, I looked over my shoulder to give the tom a fake-annoyed, but affectionate glance as I continued to walk through the house, eventually padding through the kitchen and managing to feel a wave of excitement as I then crawled through the tiny, cat-sized door that let to the outside. *Thank StarClan.*

But almost immediately after that, I couldn't help but wrinkle my nose at the sight before me – this *backyard*, which was disgustingly small. While I had been indifferent to Twolegs before, this was one of the many things that now made me question them. How the *heck* could they live with this tiny amount of territory?

Also, the sight of this yard irritated me because the outside *typically* would symbolize an escape for a house cat. Even with a fence, I would easily be able to climb on top of it and jump to the other side. But, as Wendell had shown me later that same day I had arrived, the idiot Twolegs that owned this next had added an extra amount of fencing at the *top* that was angled inward. So, even if you climbed to the top, you were still trapped. It was ridiculous.

However, with this new life that I *hopefully* wouldn't have to live for much longer, this area was partly what was getting me through – even the smallest hint of the forest, something as little as a patch of grass – brought me comfort.

So, I managed to let out a sigh of relief as I dove into the soft grass, practically rolling in it and letting myself pick up its scent. *And thank* goodness *for this...*

As I had expected to, I heard Wendell chuckling as he padded up next to me. "If there was ever any doubt that you're a forest cat – there isn't any now!"

I then let myself fully stretch out into the grass. "I won't disagree with you there," I meowed, my eyes closing with bliss. "In this situation, I'll take what I can get."

"Fair enough," Wendell replied, settling down in the grass beside where I was lying as he let out a sniff. "I assume you'll be here until the sun goes down?"

I let out a quick purr as I then dug my nose into all of the green. "Probably *after* the sun goes down!"

Wendell let out another purr, but out of the corner of my eye I could see his pale blue eyes widening with bewilderment. "And miss dinner?"

I looked up so I could meet the tom's gaze with narrowed eyes. "I don't think I'd be too sad about that."

"Oh, come on!" Wendell then meowed, his head tilting to the side. "The pellets haven't been *that* bad, have they?"

"Oh, they taste fine!" I replied honestly. "But the fact that I have to eat them at all is enough for me to despise them."

Wendell seemed to then shake his head in amazement. "Again, fair enough!" he then murmured. And then, to my amusement, the house cat reflected me by also rolling onto his back in the grass. "Maybe if we both stop eating the pellets and boycott them, the Twolegs will start giving us their food."

I actually let myself purr at this comment. "It's not the dream, but it'd be better! At least I'm more used to that..." *Luckily Twolegs sometimes liked to waste their food...*

I then saw Wendell narrow his eyes and turn his head towards me. "So, you've seriously lived with the big Twolegplace cats before?" he asked me, looking and sounding genuinely fascinated. "Aren't they mean and dangerous? Did you have to fight over your food?"

I couldn't help but snort in response to those questions. "Well, I probably would have, but..." I then shifted uncomfortably in my spot. "...Luckily the leader of their little pack favored me." *Or... I thought that he did...* I then thought to myself, feeling my stomach twist and hating that this still affected me in some capacity. *We're not unpacking that right now.*

"Oh? Favored?" Wendell replied to me, his eyes widening as he slightly lifted his head. "...What does that mean?"

I cocked an eyebrow back at him. "You really want me to explain it?"

The tabby tom's eyes then began to gleam as he narrowed his eyes back at me. "Please."

I reflected that same gaze right back at him. "He liked me a little more than the average cat. That's what it means."

With those words, I stared in confusion as Wendell simply stared back at me for a moment, then shifting his head back to look up at the blue sky. "Well, that makes sense," he then murmured. "You're not average at all."

I then let out a gasp and stared back at the house cat in bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

The tom's face then immediately wiped over with alarm. "That was supposed to be a compliment!"

"No... I think you just called me a little off," I pressed to Wendell as I then rolled over onto my belly, letting my gaze burn into him.

"Well, that's obvious," Wendell then breathed as he also rolled over onto his belly and faced me. "But... you're..."

He then seemed to shyly look down at his paws for a moment. "You're just not like any cat I've ever met before."

Once again, I simply stared back at the tom for a moment. "Well, thanks."

I then broke my gaze from his as I began to stare out at the yard in front of me, actually being able to feel the smallest wave of affection for the compliment, whether there was merit to it or not.

I really had to admit, Wendell's words had been correct – if he hadn't been around during the time that I'd been trapped here, I seriously might have driven myself crazy.

I mean, I was anyway, but to a smaller degree.

Did I still want to escape more than anything? Of course! But after first arriving here, I had quickly realized that Wendell had also been right about the fact that there really was no escaping this place.

Well, yet.

I always tried to keep my eyes open for an opportunity to escape, and as unnerving and discouraging the results had been so far, I wouldn't, and *couldn't* give up hope.

For Wrenkit.

And as soon as I got out of here, I was going to find her, snatch her, and take her back to ThunderClan, where the both of us belonged.

But for now, Wrenkit had to be confused and scared, wherever she was. *If she's even scared...* I then realized to myself, not sure if the thought filled me with pride or hurt me even more. *She's definitely a bright and brave one.*

But, of course, either way, that didn't make me feel better about the fact that my daughter, the love of my life, wasn't with me.

And at this thought, I let out a long, shaky sigh, and let my head rest on my paws.

Beside me, I could see Wendell staring back at me, and I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows in surprise at the next question he asked me. "Thinking about her again?" he meowed softly to me, almost seeming to read my mind.

I let out yet another sigh, and nodded with my head still on my paws. "Of course."

Wendell himself let out a sigh, and I felt him wrap his tail around my shoulders. "Mistpelt, I'm sure she was just taken to a shelter, and was maybe even adopted by some Twolegs."

"I don't care," I immediately replied, my heart physically feeling heavy as my worry for my daughter rose. "She's so little, and... kits that little shouldn't have to go without their mother. What..."

I then widened my eyes and lifted up my head, a truly horrible, unfathomable thought hitting me like a monster. "Oh my goodness, what if she doesn't even remember me?"

For a moment, Wendell's gaze seemed to reflect everything I was feeling. "What do you mean?" he asked me, sounding genuinely worried.

My eyes still wide, I turned my head to fully look back at the tom. "If she grows older and I still haven't been able to find her," I explained to him, my voice rising with fear. "Will she even remember me or what I look like?"

All of Wendell's bewilderment then seemed to disappear, and I was surprised to see him sigh and roll his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous.

That won't happen," he reassured me confidently. "A kit always has a special connection with their mother, no matter how old."

"Oh, yeah?" I pressed to Wendell, cocking an eyebrow once again. "How would you know?"

To my disappointment, the tabby simply shrugged. "I don't know... I have a mother?"

I felt my heart sink with disappointment, and I myself rolled my eyes and let out a snort. "Wow, that's crazy."

"Well, I assume I have a mother," Wendell then muttered as he furrowed his eyebrows. "I can't remember her name or what she looks like."

My eyes then felt as if they were going to pop out of my head as I stared back at him, and I felt my heart began to race. "Hey!"

"Whoops. Sorry!" the house cat then meowed frantically, looking genuinely apologetic about the very, *very* disheartening slip-up. "But if it makes you feel better-"

"I'm worried it won't," I couldn't help but mutter.

Wendell let out a quick purr before continuing. "If it makes you feel better, I was taken away from my mother as soon as I was able to live without her milk. It sounds like Wrenkit was with you for at least a bit longer?"

I sighed and shrugged helplessly, trying to cling onto the tom's words at least somewhat. "I guess..." I nearly whispered. "But..."

"I know, I know," Wendell murmured at me, his eyes now full of sympathy. "Or... at least I understand, or am *trying* to understand."

He then let out a sigh and shook his head. "I've never had kits before, but I can't even imagine how hard it has been being away from yours for even this long."

I gave the tom a small nod, managing to feel at least a bit of gratitude for him trying to show some support. "Well, I'll give you

some props, because you said it well..." *But as long as I'm away from her, and with every day that goes by, I'm going to worry that she won't remember me... or won't want to be around me after all of this time...*

Wendell seemed to sense that I still needed some reassurance. "Hey, even if Wrenkit is young, there is *no* way that she's not remembering you, and again..." I then felt him flick my ear again. "I fully mean that as a compliment."

I couldn't help but let out a sniff, making sure to actually give him a look of gratitude. "Thanks," I murmured. I then almost immediately narrowed my eyes, confused as Wendell suddenly looked a bit dodgy – his head looking down at his paws as he shifted them back and forth. "What?"

He then shook his head quickly, as if to pull himself out of a daze. "Oh, nothing!" he insisted, but then quickly when back to the shy demeanor. "I just was curious... does... this tom that... *favored* you happen to be the father of your kit?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, having worried up until now that that question was going to come. "Unfortunately," I muttered in reply.

"Ah, interesting," Wendell meowed, his paws still shuffling, weirdly. "Is... is he still around?"

I felt a chill run down my spine at the question, and my heart felt heavy once again. "No, he's not. Not around with me, or..."

I then closed my eyes as I slowly shook my head. "Not around on this earth anymore."

It was silent for a moment, and I finally opened my eyes when I heard Wendell reply. "Oh!" he meowed. "Oh..."

I then took in a sharp inhale as I felt the tip of his tail touch my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Mistpelt. I... I don't know what to say."

I looked back at the tom, quickly shaking my head back him as I let my own head return to more rational thought – a rarity these days. "Oh, don't be sorry. Trust me."

I then sighed and shrugged, deciding that in these circumstances, I suppose being a bit vulnerable in this sense wouldn't have any consequences. "The only good thing that came out of that relationship was my daughter."

Wendell slowly nodded, seeming to try and process my words before replying. "Well, it sounds like it was worth it for that reason... I think?"

"Oh, yeah, for sure," I reassured the tom. "As weird as it sounds, I'm thankful that I have someone in my life that's so hard to stay away from."

"Wow," Wendell breathed as he now seemed to shake his head in amazement. "You sure are strong."

"I try," I murmured as I shrugged at the tom. "What else can I be?"

I then simply sat there, not sure exactly what to say next as Wendell then stared at me for a moment, his pale blue eyes gleaming.

And just before I was about to ask why his eyes looked as if he was staring right into starlight, he shook his head and then nudged my shoulder with his tail. "Hey, while the Twolegs are still out, how about we *really* try to give you a break from those gross pellets and try to raid the pantry?"

I raised my eyebrows and widened my eyes back at the tom. "Are you serious?"

"Completely!" the tom replied enthusiastically. "I used to do it every once in a while, but now I have even more motivation to do it again! What do you say?"

I narrowed my eyes for a moment, honestly reluctant to leave my comforting grass.

But at the same time, the grass is also where I did most of my mourning. *And... is that really how I wanted to spend my time?*

After another few moments of pondering, I gave a shake of my fur and gave Wendell a sharp nod. "You know what? Let's do it!" I

meowed. "And hey, even if the pantry doesn't work out – I am completely fine with raiding the trash can."

With my words, Wendell's eyes widen, and he let out a snort as he looked at me up and down. "Well, then you go do that, and I'll watch."

I then couldn't help but let out a purr as I followed Wendell back inside, trying not to make myself feel too badly for doing something that even slightly excited me, even during these roughest of rough times.

But considering I was stuck in these circumstances, I had to try and make the best of it. And luckily, I at least had another cat by my side.

Chapter 31

[image]

I had only been asleep for what felt like a few moments before I found myself plunging into a dream – something that had been very, *very* rare since I had been in this Twoleg home. To be honest, under these circumstances, and constantly being irritated, anxious and antsy, I was lucky if I even slept half the night, and I came in and out of sleep so often that I didn't ever have enough time to dream.

But I wasn't sure if I was actually exhausted and not as on-alert, or if my bed was actually feeling kind of comfy, or maybe the leftover sandwich I'd eaten out of a trash can left me kind of loopy... but no matter how it came to happen, this experience was already so different than any experience I'd had.

First of all, because I could actually somewhat comprehend what was around me.

Well, even that would be an understatement. Not only could I comprehend my surroundings, but I felt like I was actually *in* them.

And the first thing I found myself doing was gasping in surprise as my gaze immediately seemed to stretch *down* for several tail lengths, my paws just a bit a way from the edge of a large gorge – similar to the one that Chrissy, Sparrow and I had shared a meal on the top of on the day that we'd decided to explore the forest.

But this one was for sure different, and it actually felt so much more colossal, and there actually wasn't water at the bottom of the cliff I was on. Weirdly, it actually reminded me a bit of ThunderClan's ravine, with indents within gorge ledges that could serve as dens, a small pond for water, and some greenery scattered around that looked like it had been put there rather than grown. *Where the heck am I, and why?*

I then found myself letting out a snort and giving a quick shake of

my head. *Why does it even matter? I'm dreaming! It's all nonsense!*

But as I further let my surroundings sink in, and as I could literally feel the warm rock on my paw pads, I slowly narrowed my eyes down into slits. *But then again... I don't think I've ever experienced something this vivid before. And I unfortunately know that it's not real.*

I then narrowed my eyes even more, slowly padding closer to the edge of the cliff and attempting to peer over.

I then lifted my head, gaping my jaws apart and trying to take in the scents around me. The fact that I could smell anything here at *all* was so odd to me.

But nevertheless, because I could, I tried, in an effort to try and see if I wasn't alone here.

Below, the gorge was completely empty, despite how inhabited and lived-in it appeared to be.

However, behind me, I quickly realized that it was a completely different story.

My claws instinctively unsheathed, my ears also flicking and my eyes widening in alarm as I suddenly heard very quick movement coming from behind me – what sounded like pawsteps quickly brushing through the grass.

Hoping that the fact that this was a dream protected me and my safety, I let myself quickly whip around. For just a few moments, all I could catch a glimpse of was a whole entire forest of trees, but I then let out a gasp of complete bewilderment once I discovered what the sources of the noises were.

Pelting in front of me through the trees beyond were three cats, or at least, some *semblance* of cats. There were two adult-sized cats, along with a slightly smaller one, all faded and blurry as if they were underwater or in the midst of fog. Whoa...

All three of them were moving so swiftly, as if no obstacle in front of the, phased them at all. They not only swerved gracefully on the ground, but leapt up onto rocks and boulders that were scattered

around. One of them, the smaller one, believe it or not, began to climb up a tree as effortlessly as if they were walking on flat ground.

They made it to the top in moments flat, and the two larger cats below seemed to look up with pride as the smaller cat then proceeded to leap from branch to branch, and tree to tree. The two larger cats eventually joined, climbing up adjacent trees just as easily and then following their smaller counterpart as they jumped up in the trees.

For a while, all I could do is watch in awe, and also keep myself from actually following them and letting myself leap up into those branches. The sight of them excited me, but also weirdly filled me with such a sense of nostalgia. *I haven't let myself fly like this since Chrissy and Sparrow were alive...* I realized as my heart seemed to sink. *There was BloodClan, and then ThunderClan and Wrenkit...*

I then let my eyes close for a moment as emotion seemed to well up in them. And ThunderClan had trees, *but... I've never had a chance to embrace my roots... not for a long time.*

My eyes then quickly opened again, and I felt my ears flick a second time. *My... roots.*

I then shook my head quickly, and forced myself to finally look back at the three cats frolicking through the trees. Then, I watched them wide-eyed as they one by one leapt back down onto the ground, landing as gracefully as they would be if they were jumping off of the easiest platform.

They then continued forward, and I found my ears flicking in surprise as I realized they seemed to be heading in the direction of the gorge. Sure enough, within moments they were effortlessly leaping down to the bottom, rock by rock.

And as my gaze followed the three cats to the bottom of the gorge, I let out an audible gasp as I then noticed the now *dozens* of cats that were now there waiting for them. Some were lounging in the sun, some were sharing fresh-kill with each other, some seemed to be training...

They looked like a *Clan*.

But what was this Clan? I didn't recognize them or where they were, *and Barley hadn't told me about anything like this when he told me all about the Clans...*

I then slowly blinked as I continued to stare down at the unified group. *At least...* Barley *didn't...*

I then felt my eyes widen. *Wait a moment...* It suddenly hit me like a monster – *could this possibly be SkyClan... the original SkyClan that died off long before Firestar and Sandstorm went to create the new one?*

I then felt my eyes widened as I turned back around to face the forest. *The ones that were apparently notorious for their jumping, climbing, and landing skills? The ones that used their long limbs to climb up the tallest trees with no problems, jumping from branch to branch, and also were able to jump from high rocks and make the perfect landing...*

I then had to sit down as my thoughts began to swirl. And I mean, any cat could develop those skills if they wanted to, but... I then closed my eyes and gave a shake of my head. With Chrissy, Sparrow and I... they were innate.

I then jumped, letting out another, even louder gasp when suddenly absolutely everything around me disappeared, turning into the most dense fog I'd ever seen in my life. *Excuse me!?* I said in my thoughts, not even sure who I would be trying to talk to. *I wasn't anywhere near finished with my thoughts yet!*

Luckily, my shocked and irritated thoughts quickly cleared as everything around me simultaneously seemed to clear.

I practically whipped myself back and forth, trying to absorb everything around me as quickly as possible.

Weirdly, for a moment, I almost thought that I had just been beamed into another part of what I now thought to be SkyClan's gorge camp, but it only took me another few moments to realize that this place was much, much different, and definitely a bit

smaller.

However, it was just as rocky, and had edges and cliffs that plunged down into this area. And also, just like the other gorge, it was filled with cats – ones that were familiar to me in a much different way than the last cats were.

And as their scents wafted through my nose, I actually found myself having to hold back a wail of grief and sadness, because I could just barely scent the tinge of my home – ThunderClan. I hadn't lived there my whole life, but my loyalty to them was enough for me to be certain of that.

Unfortunately though, also just like the last cats, these cats were just as blurry as the last ones, and I could hardly make out an eye color, let alone fur color of any of them. But at least I could tell that they all seemed to be moving around this camp with ease – clearly they were at peace, and if the other Clans were around, they were at peace with them as well.

And after several moments of me simply taking this all in, my heart heavy with longing, and also confusion as to why I was seeing this, I flicked my ears as my attention was suddenly brought to one of the higher ledges that jutted out over the camp.

At the end of the ledge were two cats, just as unrecognizable as the cats wandering below them. They both seemed to be surveying the camp, both of their chests puffed out with pride – not malice, or ambition. *If I wasn't certain that these were Clan cats before, with Clan cats leading them, I am now...*

Full of more longing and admiration, I padded up closer to the two of them, the shadow of the ledge now casting onto my fur.

And while getting closer didn't make the two cats look much clearer, I still gasped as I glanced up at their spots once again.

One of the cats on the ledge – the cat on the right – seemed quite peculiar to me despite how little I could observe about it. While I could tell that some of its fur was darker and some of it was possibly white, that's all I could see.

At least, fur-wise. This is why I was baffled when I could so clearly recognize the two brown and green orbs on the cat's face that seemed to glow in the sunlight. *Hazel...* I then thought. *Hazel eyes... I haven't seen those in anyone but Chrissy, or...*

I then took a pawstep back as everything around me seemed to disappear once again, turning to the same horrible fog that had surrounded me and encapsulated me just earlier. Oh, come on!

But this time, almost simultaneously, the fog disappeared once again, and I was in new surroundings once again. This time, I nearly threw up in mouth as I realized that I was back in the StarClan-cursed Twoleg nest that I was in now.

However, I knew that I was still dreaming, because for whatever reason, instead of me "waking up" in my cat bed, I was now facing one of the many doors that was in this house – one of the only ones I had never been through before. *Weird...*

I lifted one of my front paws up in an attempt to push the door open, but I then let out a yelp as I fell forward – my paw actually going *through* the door. And I barely had time to process this as I then continuously fell forward, down and down and down what I assumed to be a flight of stairs.

When I guessed I was coming to the bottom, I tried my best to get into a forward rolling position, allowing my head to touch the bottom so that I could roll swiftly forward and then back onto my paws. I hadn't ever exactly been trained on how to make a good landing after falling down stairs, but I still managed to be successful in this instance. *I suppose it's something to brag about...*

As soon as I was up on all four of my paws, I gave a shake of my fur and let out a huff. *Geez... what the heck just happened?* I asked myself as I turned around to look back up at the door I had literally *gone* through. *Before that happened, I was certain this was a dream... now I wish it wasn't. Because if I could only walk through walls...*

I then felt a chill run down my spine as I turned back around, narrowing my eyes as I tried to gauge my surroundings for the third time tonight. Obviously, from my tumble down the stairs that led to

this spot, I knew for sure that this was a basement that these Twolegs had kept me and Wendell from.

And it's certainly interesting... and creepy... I thought as I looked around at the outlines of several dark objects, with light only coming from some small windows that practically met the ceiling, and heard the rumbles of miscellaneous machines that Twolegs used for whatever reasons. *Why would my dream bring me here? I've never even seen this place before!*

I then closed my eyes for a moment, giving my fur another shake as I let out another huff. *Well, Mistpelt, maybe if you look around a bit, you'll find out.*

So, with that, I padded forward, having no idea what I would find, or even *could* find in such a dark space.

And as I had predicted, I found my paws leading me towards the light, the single beam of light that splashed out from the window that was tail-lengths above me. As much as I loved the sight of any window during this confinement I felt I had been dealing with for eternity, I of course still remembered what Wendell had told me the day that I was brought here – all of the windows in this house were sealed shut.

But after only a moment of thinking, I felt my ears flick and my eyebrows raise. *Well, maybe not all of them?*

My heart now pounding with excitement and anticipation, I practically whipped myself back around and ran back towards the stairs. Once I made it to the bottom one, I found myself flying up them as quickly as I had fallen down them.

Once I felt I was in a good spot, I stopped at the step I was on and whipped myself back around – a little more carefully this time.

And I then felt a twinge of satisfaction as I found exactly what I was looking for.

A window in this house that was not like the others – a window that I could be certain was *not* sealed shut.

Wendell had told me what to look for – all of the other windows I had seen in this house had been permanently shut with extra wood panels, and something strange the dark tabby tom had called *glue* – two things of which I could not see on this window at *all.* It was a perfectly good window that could be opened once the lever on it was turned right.

I found a smirk slowly emerging on my face. This was my escape.

And just as this crossed my mind, everything around me turned into a fog one last time. But instead of the fog fading away to show me somewhere new, it faded away into darkness and nothing.

And then, my eyes quickly flew open, and I found myself back in my disgusting, but comfortable... disgustingly comfortable cat bed.

I immediately felt a shiver run down my spine as I rolled onto my back, making an attempt to process everything that I had just seen.

Once of those things being my way out of here, if the everything my dream showed me was true. And who decided to send that all my way, I'm not sure, but soon enough I will be able to confirm one, if that door does indeed lead to a basement and two, if said basement has that very window I saw.

However, even if I did make those discoveries, I already knew it wasn't going to be an easy escape. From what I could remember – that window was not close to the ground, and nothing was close to it that I could climb from or jump from to get to it. *However... that's not the end of the world...*

I then let out a quiet huff and shook my head. *This is a lot to think about considering I haven't even gotten to look at the basement in* real *life. I'll take a look tomorrow*, I thought hopefully.

I then rolled over onto my side. *For now, I can think about what else I saw in my dream...* I then thought. *What about that gorge? And ThunderClan?*

I then rolled over onto my stomach as I covered my eyes with both of my front paws. *If the part of my dream with this house's basement*

means anything, who's to say that those other two parts don't as well? I can be certain that I didn't see any of these strange cats or strange places for no reason... do I have some relation to SkyClan? And...

I then slowly let my paws move away from my eyes. *And that hazel-eyed cat that I saw in ThunderClan, in that strange territory... was that...?*

I then let out a sigh and rolled back onto my stomach. *Come on, Mistpelt, you can't be the only cat in the world that carries the hazel eyes gene. How would all of that even happen anyway? Why.. and* how *would she be there?* I then told myself, however, not completely believing myself. *Geez, I'm going to be up all night thinking about this stuff...*

"Hey, Mistpelt?"

I then flicked my ears and quickly lifted up my head from my bed, immediately recognizing Wendell's voice through the darkness. "Yeah, I'm here!" I whispered out to him, hoping he could hear me from his cat bed just a few tail-lengths away.

"Are you okay?" I then heard the tom ask, and as my eyes quickly began to adjust to the darkness, I could see him standing up from his bed, and his pale blue eyes glowing with concern. "You've been stirring in your bed like crazy! More than usual."

I let out a grunt and rolled my eyes, slightly annoyed considering this wasn't the first time that Wendell had pointed this out to me. "Yeah... crazy dream..." I revealed to the tom, my thoughts still too scattered for me to even attempt to go into details. "And while I think I was in some deep sleep while it all happened, I do *not* see a world where I'll be able to fall back asleep tonight."

"Crazy dreams will definitely do that," Wendell replied after a sniff. I then could just barely see him flick his ears and glance at one of the windows outside as the eerie sound of wind seemed to howl and shake the leaves of the trees surrounding the nest. "And even beyond that, it's freezing outside, and in here. Why our housefolk haven't warmed up this place is beyond me."

"Okay, first off, *your* housefolk," I muttered back to Wendell, bringing him to roll his eyes. "And second off, I agree – it is pretty cold in here."

I then let out a sigh and let my head fall back onto my bed. "Under these current circumstances of mine, there's honestly no way I'm getting any more sleep tonight."

I then narrowed my eyes and shifted my head to my side as I heard Wendell seem to clear his throat nervously. "What's your problem?" I then meowed to him.

My eyes managed to narrow even more once the tabby tom cleared his throat a second time. "Well, I mean, um..." I then could just barely see him shifting his paws back and forth in his bed. "If you wanted to, you could, um... sleep here in my bed with me?"

"Whoaaa..." I meowed, quickly standing up in my bed in alarm. "What do you mean?"

I could see the tom's eyes staring widely back at me as he slowly shook his head. "I didn't know there was anything else that I could mean..."

"Wow, what a relief," I meowed half sarcastically.

"I literally was just asking if you wanted to sleep... next to me... in my bed... simple as that," Wendell then slowly explained to me. "That's all I meant to say."

"Really," I then pressed to the tom. "Okay then, I guess you mean it that innocently."

"Innocently? What are you... oh..." I then could see Wendell's eyes widening once again. "Oh!"

I then rolled my eyes as the tabby tom's gaze narrowed. "Oooooh..." he then meowed in an annoyingly smug tone. "You thought that I meant-"

"See, that's what I was worried about," I huffed to Wendell as I turned away from him completely. "I'm fine here. Goodnight."

"Oh, Mistpelt, come on." I then was surprised to hear Wendell's pawsteps as he seemed to pad closer to my nest. "I was joking, and I really did mean that all innocently."

I then just barely turned my head around to face him, so that I could see the genuine warmth and concern that was glowing in his eyes. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, so you don't have to do it," he meowed softly. "But I also want you to get sleep, and maybe a bit of a different space and being next to another cat could help with that?"

For several moments, I could only stare back at the tom with strong skepticism. And after what I'm sure felt like an eternity to him, I finally let out a sigh and stood up, admitting to myself that he honestly was not wrong, and the closer company sounded nice. "If you try anything, you'll wake up with no fur tomorrow."

"I'm fully aware of that," Wendell murmured to me, his eyes still glowing as he stepped aside, allowing me to step into his cat bed. He then watched me as I quickly settled down.

And as much as I wanted to try and fall asleep right then and there, I was sure to keep one eye open and watch as Wendell followed behind me into the bed. Tingles ran through my fur as his pelt brushed mine, and I felt his flank press right up against me as he also laid down.

"Comfortable?" he whispered to me.

"I'm peachy," I replied back.

I then opened both eyes, slightly surprised as I then felt the tom's tail wrap around my back. "Is this okay?" he then asked.

"Yeah..." I breathed, almost surprising myself with my quick answer. "That's fine."

Then, with that, I heard the dark tabby tom let out a yawn, and I felt his whiskers brush the back of my head as he lowered his own down into the cat bed.

Already, I was already feeling much more warm and comfortable.

And actually, as much as I still wanted to drown in the thoughts that had sparked from my dreams, I found I was actually growing too tired to even try.

Whether it was Wendell's closeness or something else, I actually thought I was going to be able to fall asleep.

And so, after I yawned myself, I closed my eyes and sent a quick prayer to StarClan as I tried my best to let myself drift off into sleep. Not only did I want to try and get some rest, but after my dream, I had to realize that it was practically *vital. I mean, how will I be able to plot my escape on no sleep?*

Chapter 32

[image]

"You really got me excited just to tell me we're stealing from a bucket of slop?"

Not that it was necessarily new, but I was utterly confused from where I stood in the kitchen next to Wendell – the both of us staring up at the kitchen counter that had a large, almost dirt-covered bucket sitting on top of it.

Wendell had woken up just to show me *this*, claiming that there were some "good steals" inside. *I know that I've certainly been stolen from already today...*

I padded up a little closer to the counter, narrowing my eyes as I slightly craned my neck. "What's even inside?" I asked as I then slightly leaped up, my front paws now pressed against the lowest cabinets as I tried to take a whiff. "Wait... is that *fish* I'm smelling?"

"Wow, your nose works at a basic level!" Wendell murmured sarcastically, and after I shot him a half-amused, half-enraged look, he let out a purr and gave me a nudge. "Yes, that is fish is that bucket."

"But... *why?*" I then asked, genuinely baffled. "Why in the name of everything that makes sense do we have a bucket of fish in our kitchen?"

I then blinked in surprise, then gave a quick shake of my head. "*The* kitchen."

I then tried to ignore Wendell's gaze as it seemed to fall on me for a moment, his pale blue eyes glimmering, before his gaze returned to the bucket above. "I'll try and explain it, but I don't think it'll make things make any more sense for you..." he then muttered, his head slowly shaking. "Have you ever gone fishing?"

I looked back at the tom with my own pale blue narrowed eyes. "...Yes?" I replied. I then let out a sniff as memories of the darned activity came to my mind. "Yeah, I have – Chrissy and Sparrow taught me how to, and we did it a few times."

I then began to shake my head slowly. "I once lost my balance when I was swiping down to get a fish, and I landed face-first into the water."

I then flashed Wendell a slightly embarrassed look before quickly looking down to stare at the floor. "Yes, I've fished before."

After Wendell let out a small chuckle, he nodded back up towards the bucket. "Well, what do you call them... Twolegs? Twolegs fish too."

I looked back at the brown tabby tom with wide eyes. "With those grimy, gigantic paws? *How?*"

"Well, that's the thing – they don't use their paws," Wendell replied, laughter in his voice. "They're so incompetent that they make these weird, long sticks with a string and a hook on the end to catch fish."

I would expect nothing less... "Geez, how weird are they?" I then said out loud.

I then narrowed my eyes as I further processed what Wendell had just said. "Wait a moment..."

I then stared back at the tom in bewilderment. "Did I just hear you call a Twoleg incompetent?"

Wendell immediately rolled his eyes at my question. "Eh, the more that I hear you complain, the more I'm realizing that you're maybe not just spewing hate for no reason."

"Spewing hate?" I repeated, my eyes wide, before I scoffed past Wendell and began to pad towards the kitchen table. "Oh, for StarClan's sake, let's just grab these fish."

Then, as I heard Wendell laughing behind me, I paused for a moment and forced myself to look back at his stupid, snarky face.

"And how do we plan to do that?"

I watched as Wendell narrowed his eyes and then looked back up at the top of the counter. "Well, hopefully, it should be as easy as leaping up to the counter, and-"

I immediately flicked my ears back at the tom in surprise. "Oh, *that* easy? Well, then..."

With an easy, effortless push off of my back legs, I excitedly leapt up to the top of the counter, now weirdly excited to get closer to the bucket of fish.

"I mean, *pretty* easy, but..." I then could feel Wendell's eyes on me as I trotted lightly across the counter. "Mistpelt-"

I then arrived at the tall, dirty bucket, the fish smell practically overwhelming at this point. but nevertheless, I crouched down and braced for yet another leap. As soon as I was sure my stance was in order, I then leaped, not being able to hear Wendell's next words as I prepared myself to snatch a fish from inside.

But unfortunately, for once in my life, I think my leap was *too* good.

And where I thought a fish to grab would be, there was nothing.

Instead, I found myself leaning face first deep inside of the bucket, and receiving a face full of fish.

As I felt the wet, scaly texture against my fur, I immediately had to keep myself back from letting out a disgusted squeal. "Ugh, butterflies in a bog beating bats!" I cursed as I began to squirm frantically in my spot. "Geez!"

"Mistpelt!" I then heard Wendell shout out in surprise. Although, I felt the embarrassment and frustration I was feeling rise as I heard the obvious laughter in his voice. "Are you okay?"

"Would *any* cat with a face full of fish be okay?" I barked back at the tom as I tried to push myself backwards and out with my front paws.

I then couldn't tell if I was relieved or annoyed when I heard Wendell's paws land on the counter. "Hold on, don't squirm around so much," he called up to me, sounding like he'd made his way to the bucket. "Are you kay if I grab onto your tail?"

"There's not much I could do right now to stop you," I muttered to the housecat through gritted teeth.

I then gave a hard roll of my eyes as I heard another snicker escape Wendell. "Okay..." he then purred.

"Stop laughing!" I then practically growled at him, my voice sounding weird and echo-y from inside the bucket, which probably didn't help me sound very assertive.

"I'm not laughing!" I then heard Wendell insist, despite the obvious purr that was still rising in his throat. I then slightly cringed as I felt the tom's teeth gently grip the end of my tail. "Alright, just push off of the bottom like you were, and I'll pull you out at the same time. On three?"

"Whatever," I hissed.

"Okay... one, two... three!"

On three, as planned, I promptly pushed off of the fish in the bucket with my front paws, and at the same time, I could feel Wendell pulling on my tail.

With that combination, I practically flew out of the bucket. But luckily, I was actually prepared for the landing this time, allowing my back paws to land on the counter, my front paws eventually following.

Thank StarClan, I thought as I gave a shake of my fur and let out a small gag. *I can be certain now that the Dark Forest probably smells better than what I just experienced.*

And as I heard Wendell padding up to meet me, I only managed to glance at him for half a heartbeat, immediately noticing that he still seemed to be suppressing laughter. "Stop it!"

"I am not doing anything!" Wendell insisted, his voice full of humor. "In fact... all I did was save your tail!"

I then furrowed my eyebrows as I watched him narrow his eyes and then give me a wink. "Or... save you *with* your tail."

With those words, I let out a groan, forcing myself to look away from the tom once again. "I am overwhelmed by your sympathy."

"You love diving face-first into things, don't you?"

"Gosh, comfort me less, will ya?" I then hissed at the tabby tom, trying my hardest to not show him that I actually did find his jabs a bit funny.

I then let myself show the smallest smirk when I felt his tail flick my ear. "Oh, come on," he then meowed to me more gently, his laughs gone. "I hope you know I'm just teasing. Are you okay?"

I let out a sigh, giving another shake of my fur. Then, after another moment I finally turned to face Wendell. I couldn't help but feel a wave of warmth as I met his pale blue gaze of genuine concern. "Yes, I am fine," I murmured to the tom before returning the flicking-ear gesture. "One day I'll forget the overwhelming smell of fish and the feelings of public humiliation."

I then flashed the tabby tom a sheepish look as I watched him sigh and shake his head. "Sit down," he then breathed. And after I did as he said, I was slightly surprised as he then began to lick my head and face. "Maybe getting rid of some of that fish smell will help with that."

I actually found myself having to hold back a purr, genuinely appreciating the gesture. "Well, thanks."

"Sure," Wendell murmured in between licks. I then lifted my head, letting my eyes close as he began to lick around my chin and neck. "After that experience, are you still in the mood to eat fish?"

I then slightly shifted so that the tom could more easily get my shoulder. "Ugh... when one gets hungry enough, it's hard to be picky," I admitted to Wendell. "And if I have the choice between

fish or catfood... you know what I pick."

"I sure do," Wendell replied. I then widened my eyes in surprise when he gave me one last lick on the cheek. "Now, how about I tell you what the proper plan for obtaining this fish was supposed to be?"

I honestly had to shake my head to bring myself back into focus. One – because Wendell had been so kind as to help clean me off. Two – Wendell had been so kind. Three – I liked it. And four – I hate, hate, *hated* how foreign that felt, to say the *least*.

But I didn't have a lot of time to unpack that right now. I really was hungry. "I assume the plan does not involve impulsively leaping into the bucket?" I purred, sighing and rolling my eyes.

Wendell let out an amused sniff. "Nope – that male Twoleg never catches enough fish to fill up the entire bucket anyway." I then raised my eyebrows in intrigue as he brushed past me, padding towards the bucket. "It'll be a bit harder, but my plan was to completely push over the bucket onto the ground, and we can grab what we want!"

With those words, I immediately let out a frustrated sigh and closed my eyes. "We already could have been eating fish right now if I'd just let you keep talking..."

"But where's the fun in that?" he replied, giving me a wink that caused me to roll my eyes. "Ready?"

Now more eager than ever, I padded over to join Wendell, facing the bucket and flanking the brown tabby tom's long fur. "Let's do it."

Then, after the two of us both exchanged a determined, excited look, we both began to push the bucket closer to the edge of the counter, as if we'd been prompted to do so at the same time. Luckily, it was a fairly easy task, and it only took us a few heartbeats before the pushing tension was released, and the bucket fell off the edge.

Then, just a heartbeat after that, I heard the beautiful, slimy sound

of the fish spilling out of the bucket onto the floor. *Heck, yes!*

"Score!" Wendell then exclaimed, giving me a light nudge. "Let's dig in!"

Then, as the housecat leapt back down to the floor, I found that I didn't want to immediately follow him, and instead, simply watch him for a moment as I finally took the time to figure out how I was feeling about everything that had just happened.

Well, for one, I felt very weird, which I guess could be a good or bad thing. I also felt a bit frustrated and strange about the fact that this whole fish and bucket moment had brought me back to the day I had taken the expedition with Scourge to steal the meat from that building in the Twolegplace. *Goodness, it feels like so long ago...* I thought, a chill running down my spine. And this situation is so different, yet it brings me back. *I don't like that it does...*

I then closed my eyes, giving a single shake of my head. *As good and fun and exciting as that experience was at the time, almost everything that happened after that absolutely tainted it.*

I then opened my eyes, my gaze immediately falling on Wendell's long, brown tabby pelt. *Gosh, do I hope that this situation won't be the same...*

I then gave a quick shake of my head. *Wait, why does that even matter? I'm getting the heck out of here soon!*

I then flicked my ears, letting out an almost inaudible gasp. *That reminds me...* "Oh! By the way..." I began excitedly as I finally leapt down to the floor to join Wendell. "After we finish with the fish, I have something to show you!"

Wendell let out an intrigued grunt through a full mouth. "You have something to show *me?*" he pressed as he lifted his head up from his fish. "...In this house?"

I gave the tom an eager nod. "Oh yeah, I do!" I replied before taking my own bite of a fish.

"Well, you seem very excited about it!" Wendell then meowed,

slightly narrowing his eyes.

"I am!"

The tom then simply stared at me for a few moments, his eyes narrowing even more. "...In this house?"

"Oh, absolutely," I answered as I reflected Wendell's gaze.

I then watched as Wendell continued to stare, swallowing his bite of fish. "...that you're excited about?"

"Mhm!" I grunted as I nodded through my own full mouth. I then quickly swallowed the fish and stood up. "Okay, I'm done! Those fish are filling!"

Weirdly, Wendell didn't stand up when I did. Actually, I found myself standing their awkwardly as he continued to lay on the floor and eat his food quite leisurely. "Gosh, you're eating rather slowly all of the sudden..."

The tabby tom let out a sniff, shifting uncomfortably from his spot. "Just... really trying to revel in the fish."

I furrowed my eyebrows back at him. "Fair enough, I guess," I muttered as I forced myself to sit down and wait.

However, this darn housecat was acting like he had the rest of his lifetime to be able to eat this fish. "...Almost done?" I couldn't help but ask after waiting for what had felt like an eternity.

To my surprise, Wendell let out an exasperated sigh, followed by a shrug. "Uh... yeah. Last bite," he murmured almost inaudibly. I then let out a sigh of relief once he seemed to be done chewing, and then stood up. "Alright. What are you going to show me?"

I then let out an excited squeal, brushing past the tom and padding deeper into the house. "Follow me!"

I then eagerly trotted through the house, luckily knowing exactly where I was heading. I only was mildly observing the fact that Wendell was slowly trailing behind me, not matching my pace at

all. Why is he suddenly being so weird?

But nevertheless, I continued one, practically jumping up and down with excitement by the time I arrived to the basement door.

The same one that my dream had shown me. It really existed. "Here we are!" I purred, watching and waiting for a few heartbeats while Wendell made his way to me. "Do you know what this door leads to?"

Wendell's eyes seemed to be full of wariness as he then sat down, wrapping his tail around his paws. "Uh... it's the basement door, isn't it?"

"Yes!" I breathed, relieved that the tom recognized it. "Have you been in the basement?"

"Well, a couple of times?" Wendell murmured as he seemed to shift back and forth uncomfortably. "It's colder down there during the hotter months, so I sometimes go down there to cool off."

I then narrowed my eyes as he awkwardly cleared his throat. "How come?"

I gave an excited lash of my tail, hoping that Wendell's weird behavior was all in my head, as I then began to prod the ajar door open with my paw. "Well, let me show you," I meowed excitedly. "Come on!"

As I then began to pelt down the basement stairs, I could hear Wendell's nervous gasp from the top. "Whoa! Take it easy down those stairs!" he called down to me before beginning to follow me down.

I quickly arrived to the bottom, slightly wincing as my paws touched the cold, concrete floor. "Oh, please! I'm fine! If I can climb up and down trees and gorges, I can make it down some stairs!" I meowed proudly.

I then felt a wave of excitement as Wendell himself made it to the bottom of the stairs, just a few heartbeats after I had. "This way!" I then squealed as I padded through the basement. "Okay..."

I then whirled back around to face Wendell, feeling a wave of triumph as I flicked my tail towards the very window that my dream had shown me. *And how my dream was able to show me this before I'd even seen it myself... I don't know if I'll ever know.* "See that window up there?"

That wave of triumph was then followed by a wave of nerves and concern when my question was followed by a couple of moments of silence. Then, with a sigh from Wendell. "Sure do."

Now I was certain his weird behavior wasn't in my head. Did the fish do something weird to his head? I've never really seen him act this way before.

I then felt a chill run down my spine. *I knew that sharing a good moment – several good moments - with a tom was too good to be true...*

But despite my worried thoughts and my rapidly pounding heart, I tried to push on, clinging onto that small possibility that I was just misreading his behavior. "Well, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but this window is quite different from other windows in this house – it's not blocked off or sealed at all! Yes, it's high up, but..."

I then gestured with my tail around the basement. "Look at all of the junk that's down here!" I then purred ecstatically. "If I just stack it all up to the window, or just put together some sort of climbing contraption or something tall to jump off of... I can get right up to that window, open it, and get the heck out of here!"

I then turned back around and padded up to Wendell, trying to ignore the fact that I was being met with dark, worried eyes. "So, what do you think? Does it seem feasible?"

I then let out a nervous snort. "Well, I don't care if it's not *completely* feasible, it's a possible way out of here!" I then gave a quick shake of my head. "Sorry, I'm babbling. Thoughts?"

My heart was now practically pounding in my ears as I waited in silence once again, watching as Wendell simply looked up at the window with narrowed eyes. "Um... well, I don't know, Mistpelt. What thoughts do you want?"

I sat down, trying to keep my tail from anxiously flicking back and forth. "Um... *any*?" I pressed to the tom worriedly.

I then felt my heart drop as Wendell had the *audacity* to stand up and walk away. "Well, it looks like a way out to me, I don't know."

I simply stared off at him, my eyes narrowing down into slits. "Thank you, I agree, but..." I then stood up, padding up to him as I continued to well up with concern. "I assumed that would warrant a more positive response?"

Wendell slowly stopped in his tracks. "How is my response not positive?"

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of that question – it also was likely a coping mechanism to deal with the fact that Wendell was acting so strangely. "Well... because the typically smug, happy-go-lucky, silly little Wendell is not acting like a smug, happy-go-lucky, silly little Wendell..." I answered. I then gave him a nudge and sat down next to where he was standing. "What's up?"

After a moment, I was surprised to then see Wendell's eyes widen, and his head shook frantically. "Nothing, Mistpelt! You found a way out of here, and that's great!" he replied, his voice a bit more expressive than it had been for just a heartbeat, but that quickly went away. "You've... you've been wanting to get out of here since... you got here, and now you've found it."

I shook my head contemplatively back at the housecat, my heart still pounding nervously. "Not to be super psychological, but... your words are saying something, but the way you're saying them is saying something completely different." *Unfortunately, I know that all too well.*

As I should have expected, those words of mine prompted even more, long, eternal-feeling silence, and I couldn't tell if I was terrified or relieved by the time I heard Wendell sigh. "I don't know, Mistpelt, I just..."

He trailed off for a few moments before speaking again. "You've been here for a few moons now, and I thought..." He then let out

another sigh, his head lowering down to look at his paws. "I don't know, I did it to myself – *lied* to myself, I guess."

Lied to himself? Uh, oh.

My eyes slowly began to widen at those words, and I was almost reluctant to prompt him on. However, I had become a cat that rarely didn't speak her mind. "How did you lie to yourself?"

"Well, I don't know, Mistpelt, I..." he then murmured, followed by another sigh.

You... you've actually realized that I'm annoying to you? That you want me out of here? That I'm a waste of time to you? That you've been using me and you feel badly about it? I then blinked to myself. *At least that would be a bit of an improvement from last time...*

"Well, for a moment there, I didn't think you wanted to leave anymore."

I then raised my eyebrows and widened my eyes, completely taken aback by the tom's comment. "Oh?" And weirdly, with those words, a big weight was lifted off of my shoulders. And actually, I managed to feel a large wave of relief, and... affection. "Oh..." *Well, was that whiplash.*

I then sat down, shifting my front paws back and forth. "Oh, well, trust me, I've always wanted to leave."

I then tried to meet Wendell's gaze anxiously, the real reason for his strange behavior further processing for me. "Well, I mean, sure, I've become comfortable here and...with you, of course, but... Wendell..."

I then found myself longingly looking towards my special window. "My *kit* is out there... and I have an entire Clan out there and a forest where my heart still is. My plan was always to go back to that."

"Sure, but..." Wendell then murmured. "The Clan is only one of many places you've been to in your life, right?"

I whipped back around to face Wendell, my relief and affection beginning to go away. "Excuse me?"

"You've gotten used to so many different places – the Clan is just one of those places," Wendell tried to explain to me. "Who's to say you can't get used to another one?"

"Where?" I asked the tom, bewildered. Then, after a moment of glancing around the basement, I met Wendell's gaze again with wide eyes. "You mean *here?*"

"Well, I guess. Why not?"

"Are you joking?" I then asked Wendell, my voice rising with shock and frustration. "Did you not hear me mention my *daughter?*"

I then raised my eyebrows when Wendell let out a frustrated sigh. "Mistpelt, like I've said, I can almost be *certain* that she is safe," he replied sharply to me. "Kits are taken to shelters all of the time and are adopted by caring, loving Twolegs."

"I don't care!" I then insisted to the tabby tom, my voice becoming hoarse with emotion. "She's not with me, and that's worrisome enough for me."

I then gestured back to the window with my tail. "One day I will get out of here and I will find her!"

I then watched, trying my darndest to let myself calm down, and my grieving emotions dwindle as Wendell let out a sigh and close his eyes. "You really want to get out of here?" he then breathed.

I let out a sniff and a shrug. "Of course I do, Wendell!" I answered him with exasperation. "I thought that was always clear."

Wendell then let out a purr, shyly looking down at his paws once again. "Well, I'm sure it was, but..." He then shrugged, meeting my gaze with warm, yet sad pale blue eyes. "Maybe I just didn't want to believe it."

With those words, my heart almost seemed to stop for a moment. And suddenly, all of the worry, anger, and frustration that I'd been

feeling up until this point seemed to disintegrate like fog. "...Oh, yeah?"

"Mmhm..." Wendell murmured, his eyes beginning to gleam with both affection and guilt. "And maybe that's why I'm being a complete jerk right now, Mistpelt. I'm sorry."

I slowly shook my head back at the tom, my heartbeat audible in my ears once again. "No, I... I understand," I replied to the tom genuinely. I then padded up a bit closer to him. "And you're not being a jerk."

Wendell then let out a sniff. "I'd say that I am. I mean..." He then shrugged nervously yet again. "I'm torn, and I guess I'm not handling it very well."

I then blinked in surprise as he lightly brushed his tail along one of my shoulders. "Trust me, I want you to go back to the place you love, and to find your daughter again, but I..." He then seemed to take a moment to find his words. "I also really, really don't want you to leave."

He then nodded past me, towards the stairs. "You seemed to be accepting the fact that there was no way out, so I guess I assumed... and *hoped*, that you were here to stay."

I blinked once again, slowly taking in all of these things that Wendell was sharing with me. "Oh..." *Wow...* And once again, I found that I was feeling things that I had not felt in a very, very long time.

"I know, it's insane and deranged. I'm sorry," Wendell then meowed, his eyes widening. "I'm excited you found a way to escape. Really. I just..."

I then couldn't help but feel my stomach flutter as the tom gave me another shrug. "I just hate what it implies."

I slowly began shaking my head back at the tabby tom, so taken aback by everything that he was telling me. And as much as I didn't want to know the answer, I couldn't help but ask... "Did... did you

know about this open window and not tell me?"

And just as I had hoped, Wendell's eyes widened frantically, and he give me a quick shake of his head. "Genuinely, no!" he insisted to me. "But..."

His gaze then fully wiped over with shame. "I suppose I have to admit that even if I had known about it, I would be reluctant to share that with you."

I stared wide-eyed back at Wendell with those words, causing him to flash me a look full of reassurance. "I would, I swear! I guess I just wouldn't like it." He then let out a sniff, breaking his gaze from mine and looking to his side. "If it wasn't clear already, I like having you around."

Wow...

I could still hardly believe what I was hearing. *Wow...* I said to myself again. *I continue to experience things that I have never really experienced with a tom. At least, a tom that I... it's so, so different...*

I then once again felt my stomach begin to flutter, so much so that I was certain I was going to float off of the ground. *So... this really is going to pan out differently than the last time, huh?*

After taking another moment, I shifted my gaze to meet Wendell's once again. "So, I guess you like me walking around spewing hate then, huh?"

Soon after I'd met the tom's gaze, he shyly looked back down at his paws. "Mistpelt, hearing you talk, even if it's about how much you hate houses or how dumb Twolegs are... it's the highlight of my day."

Then, after a moment, he lifted his head and met my gaze again, his pale blue eyes sparkling like the clearest pond. "*You* are."

Wow, wow... the whiplash continues.

I then slowly began to shake my head in amazement back at Wendell as I continued to stare back into his eyes. *The feeling sure is*

mutual, but I didn't think I was ever going to give myself a chance to say that... I thought. *Being in this house has been as horrible as being in the Dark Forest would be, but... Wendell has made it infinitely better.*

He's been my *highlight. And the fact that he actually appreciates my presence makes me feel better than it probably would for a lot of cats.*

I then felt a large wave of sadness. *The only good thing that I'll take away from any of this after I leave...* I then told myself. *Darn it, I hate that I've found something that makes it harder to leave... I didn't want to ever think too much about it.*

I then pulled myself away from my thoughts, hesitating a moment before replying to Wendell. "Listen, I mean..." I then began. "It's not like this escape will be put together in a day. I'll still be around for a while."

"Yeah, but you're still *eventually* leaving," Wendell pointed out as he stared at me sadly.

"Maybe.. but until then..." I then meowed warmly as I padded even closer to the housecat. "You can continue to hear me yap on... complain, roll around in the grass... dive face first into things..."

After the two of us then exchanged a laugh, I then continued. "But you know what? Maybe I'll hold back on the complaining a bit – there's been a little less to complain about."

Wendell then let out a chuckle, cocking one of his eyebrows. "Wow, that was smooth."

"Thank you," I purred, letting my tail intertwine with his fluffy brown tabby one. "Just trying to replicate the smug, happy-go-lucky, silly little Wendell that I know very well."

Chapter 33

[image]

Oh, no. Not again...

The sky was a mix of navy, blue, and pink above me from where I stood outside, trying to catch my breath and cringing as I tried to recover from the large, violent vomit that I had just taken.

Luckily, I could only slightly see the beautiful creation that I had just excreted from my jaws, as the sun was only just beginning to rise. *Thank goodness.*

I mean, for the past few quarter moons, I had gotten up fairly early, slowly and quietly sneaking out of Wendell's cat bed to go down to the basement. To be honest, I had been spending most of my time down there taking inventory, and eventually, dragging different objects towards my favorite window to stack them. It had been a process, and I'd unfortunately only been able to stack up items just a little past my own height.

And surely I would have made more progress by now, but lately with each day that had gone by, the task had felt much more grueling and exhausting. I'd had to take more breaks, even call it a day early...

And, for the past few days, had to bolt out of the basement and outside to throw up.

Sure, I suppose I could have just let it rip in the basement or inside of the house, but I didn't want the Twolegs to make a big deal out of it, or take me to the vet thinking I was sick.

And as far as the average Twoleg could assume – I *was* sick. However, I was almost certain that I was not. At least, not in the usual way, or the way that necessarily meant anything bad.

This was my second go-around, after all. I knew how this went. *Oh,*

dear...

It was something about this morning's sickness in particular that made it finally hit, and made me feel pretty certain about it.

And now feeling a bit better with everything out of my system, I found myself padding up to some rocks that the Twolegs seemed to have set up themselves as scenery in the backyard. I hoped and prayed to StarClan that I still had the ability to jump, and then thankfully successfully leapt up to the top of the rock.

I then sat down, then wrapped my tail around my paws to keep it from shaking. *Goodness gracious, do I wish that Chrissy and Sparrow had given me the talk...* I thought to myself, letting out a sigh. *But the deed is done.*

The deed was done, and this surely meant that I would have to stay here in the Twolegplace for at least a while longer – that was the plan anyway, *but now, I have no choice...*

I then looked down at my stomach, my heart beginning to race as I was suddenly filled with so much fear and so much love at the same time. *But luckily I care about myself and you all enough to not try to push myself to my limit...* I then said silently. *My escape plan will just have to be on hold. I have to rest, and then...*

I then closed my eyes for a moment, letting out another sigh and shaking my head. *And then I will be a mother again.*

I tightened my tail's grip around my paws, now being certain that if I were to let it whip back and forth, it would likely kill any bug that flew in its path. *Great StarClan, what does this mean for my future? Returning to the Clans?*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath. *One day at a time, Mistpelt. One day at a time. But at the same time...*

I then let out a shaky sigh, opening my eyes and glancing up at the dawn sky – for comfort, I suppose. *Wrenkit is still out there...* I then thought, my heart seeming to fall and sink through the rocks below me. *Oh, my love, I am so sorry. I wish more than anything that I could*

be there for you and be with you... I was so close to getting to.

I then closed my eyes again, letting out a sigh that was even shakier than the last, because honestly – Wrenkit getting to see her new siblings felt like something that couldn't be obtained in another universe. I hated more than *anything* that I had to be selfish right now, but unfortunately, all I could focus on right now was keeping myself safe and healthy, in order to put out safe and healthy kits.

Well, that, and... telling Wendell.

He definitely was a tom to sleep in, so I had assumed it would be a long time before he even woke up. So, I was more than surprised when I heard pawsteps, and then turned around to see him making his way outside after what just felt like a few moments later.

And as I had looked back, I couldn't help but feel a wave of warmth as I saw his brown tabby pelt, the rising sun lighting his fur and making his affectionate, concerned pale blue eyes gleam like a sun-lit stream.

He hadn't even said a word yet, but I already felt comforted, and for a moment felt that everything would be okay. *I guess it's about time I felt that way about a father of my kits...*

However, once he spoke, he certainly didn't make me feel any worse. "Good morning," the tom meowed gently to me, leaping down from the Twolegs' back porch onto the grass.

I then let out a small purr, watching as the housecat yawned and stretched. "Good morning!" I replied, still trying with all of my might to keep my tail from lashing back and forth nervously. "How did you sleep?"

"Oh, pretty well," Wendell then said. I then furrowed my eyebrows as he let out a sniff. "At least, until I heard someone pelt past the bed like they were running for their life!"

My heart immediately began pounding more quickly. "Aw, shoot! Did I wake you?" I asked the tabby in a panic, for several reasons. "I'm-"

"That's not what I'm worried about..." Wendell then meowed, his gaze stern but full of concern. "It's the fact that you ran past the bed like you were running for your life."

I then took a deep breath, another attempt to try and appear calm as Wendell then padded up to the rock I was sitting on. "Are you okay?"

I stood up, preparing to join him at the bottom of the rock. "Well-"

But Wendell raised his tail as if to tell me to stop. "Wait, stay there. I'll come to you." I then felt a wave of affection as I watched him leap up to join me at my spot. I then immediately met his worried gaze, and I couldn't help but look down at my paws shyly. "This is, what? Like the third or fourth morning you've burst up from the basement and have gone straight outside to get sick."

I began to shift my paws back and forth. "How do you know I'm getting sick?"

Wendell immediately let out a snort and rolled his eyes. "Mistpelt, our bed is just a little ways away from the backyard door, and you're not exactly quiet." He then brushed his tail along my shoulder before I began to protest. "Again, not the problem. I don't care how loud or quiet of a vomiter you are, it's the fact that you're doing it at all."

After glancing at him for a brief moment, then looking down at my paws again, I saw him try to meet my gaze, his pale blue eyes still glowing with concern. "What is going on?"

I then closed my eyes for a moment, having to forcibly push down my nerves once again. *Here we go...* I told myself. *Things are going to be different this time. Things already are so different.*

After another deep breath, I unwrapped my tail around my paws so that I could then twin it with Wendell's. I then let out a purr as I then felt Wendell give me a lick on the head.

Then, as he pulled away and met his comforting, yet nervous gaze, I was almost certain that he already knew what was coming. "Well...

let's just say that..." I began, my voice shaking slightly. "Something is cooking in the oven."

Wendell seemed to take in a sharp breath. "Oh?"

"Yeah..." I continued. "Except, it's not an oven, and it's not food that's cooking."

I then let out a sniff. "And... it's hopefully not that warm in there..."

After Wendell let out a sniff as well, I watched nervously as he then let out a purr and closed his eyes. "Alright, I think I'm understanding your... weird analogy."

He then opened his eyes again, my heart practically melting as I met his uncertain, yet affectionate gaze. "Right?"

"Wow," I purred softly, flicking one of the housecat's ears. "Those kits are going to have some brilliant brains."

Again, although I was pretty sure that Wendell had known what I was going to say before I said it, I was not surprised at all when saying the word *kit* aloud still hit him like a monster. "Oh, wow..." he breathed, breaking my gaze and looking off to his side as he purred quietly. "Wow..."

"I know..." I breathed, purring with him and giving a shrug. "I'm expecting, Wendell." I then shut my eyes for a moment, overwhelmed with affection when I felt the tom tighten his grip on my tail. "And they're yours."

"Oh, they're mine?" Wendell then meowed, to my surprise. "Well, I have to say, if they *weren't* mine, that would raise so, *so* many questions."

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter, then proceeded to look shyly down at my paws once again.

Immediately, I felt Wendell trying to search my gaze. "However, I do have one."

My heart seemed to skip a beat, and I found myself immediately

preparing for the worst case scenario. "Yes?" *Oh, shoot, shoot, shoot.*

Wendell took a deep breath before answering. "How do you feel about all of this?" he then asked as he tightened his grip on my tail even more.

I looked back up to meet the brown tabby tom's gaze, looking at him full of confusion and concern. "Is there a certain way I should feel?"

"Absolutely not!" Wendell immediately insisted, bringing down my worries just a little bit. I then was fascinated as he then looked down at his own paws. "I just don't want to assume *anything*."

Oh, goodness gracious.

I had to close my eyes for a moment once again, almost all of my nerves going away, and were replaced with an overwhelming warmth and affection for this tom. *So, so sweet and considerate. What did I do to deserve this?* "Well, how does any expecting she-cat feel? I'm terrified, excited... nauseous."

Then, after Wendell and I shared a purr, I went on. "But... I..." I then trailed off, feeling another wave of sadness. "I would feel all of those to such a higher degree if..."

"If your other kit wasn't out there," Wendell meowed almost immediately after, his pale blue eyes now glowing with sympathy.

Somehow, I managed to feel even more affection for the tom just seeing that he understood. "Exactly."

I then closed my eyes, taking a deep breath in an attempt to keep my emotions in control. "Exactly."

I then raised my eyebrows in concern when Wendell let out a distressed sigh. "And this is probably the last thing that you need right now," he murmured as he shook his head slowly.

"Oh my goodness, Wendell, that is so far off!" I quickly insisted to the tom, horrified that he was feeling this way.

"Is it?"

"Of course it is!" I then demanded, feeling genuinely certain about the replies I was giving him. "I mean, yes, objectively this means that I have to stay here, and that I can't try and escape... and go out and look for Wrenkit, but..."

I then let out a shaky sigh as I felt a wave of guilt and grief. "All I can do right now is just hope that she is okay. It's my only choice."

Wendell's gaze seemed to reflect my own feelings for a moment. "I guess..."

I began to shake my head as I took a step closer to the housecat. "Wendell, I really hope that you aren't blaming yourself for this," I meowed to him a little more sharply.

Wendell then gave me a shrug, almost looking helpless for a moment, to my dismay. "I'm trying not to, but... I don't want you to be upset," he then explained to me worriedly. "You were planning your escape, Mistpelt, and hoping to get out of here soon. And now, we've..."

For a moment after Wendell trailed off, I could do nothing but slowly shake my head back at him. Sure, everything that he was worried about and everything he was saying unfortunately rang true. But my goodness, I did not blame the tabby tom for it even a little bit – even if he didn't believe it now, I hoped he eventually would.

To be honest, I was just more than happy to see that he seemed to be showing some semblance of care, as sad as it was. And, if the circumstances were a bit better, with Wendell meaning so much to me, this news would actually be more exciting than anything else I could possibly experience.

But unfortunately, things were what they were. "I miss Wrenkit," I began to tell Wendell as I stared reassuringly into his eyes. "I miss her so much, and I want to find her more than anything else in this world."

I then forced myself to take a deep breath as I took another glance up at the morning sky. "But she is strong. She is a ThunderClan cat at heart, and she has StarClan on her side..."

I then trailed off for a moment, narrowing my eyes as I briefly recalled the dream I'd had not too long ago – the one where I had potentially seen an older Wrenkit, looking strong, confident, and absolutely brilliant from where she stood in a Clan camp. Whether or not that had just been a pesky dream or a vision, it brought me great comfort. "All I can do now is pray that she is okay, and hope with everything in my being that she is safe until I can be with her again."

Wendell was clearly absorbing everything I was saying, but despite it all, his piercing eyes still were wide with anxiety. "But, what about-"

"We'll get there when we get there," I reassured the tom. "Until then..."

I then glanced down at my belly. "I also have to be with the new kits that I have been given." I then let out a sigh, feeling another intense wave of affection as I looked up and met Wendell's gaze again. "And raise them with the tom that I've come to care about so, so much."

Wendell stared warmly back at me with a gaze that made my stomach twist. "Aw, that's nice," he then meowed gently.

I then narrowed my eyes teasingly as I tilted my head to the side. "Oh, no reciprocation? That's concerning, considering-"

"Kidding!" Wendell then immediately purred. I then watched curiously as he then broke his gaze from me, letting out a sigh. "Kidding, of course..."

I then found myself growing nervous all over again as he then let out a grunt of contemplation. "What's the matter?" I immediately had to press.

Wendell then narrowed his eyes as well. "Just thinking... um..." I

then blinked in surprise as he turned to look back at me, his gaze determined. "I'll have to check out the basement, but how far have you gotten in creating your little contraption?"

I let out a frustrated sigh. "Oh, not too far," I answered honestly. "I was able to stack up a few things, but lately I've been too tired to get much more done."

"Gotcha. Hm..." Wendell then mumbled, his eyebrows furrowing as he then looked back towards the house. "Well, I can probably pick up things a little. I also know a little more about the space, so I might be able to get out some objects to stack that you haven't even seen yet. Then I can-"

"Wait, wait, wait," I cut off the tom, raising my tail in the air. "What are you talking about?"

Wendell gave a shrug, his eyes full of warmth and concern. "Well, if you're going to be resting in preparation to have kits... and then care for them, it's going to be so long before you can even *think* about getting your escape together..."

I now was staring back at the housecat in complete shock. There was no way he was saying what I thought he was. "Oh, Wendell... you don't-"

"I insist, Mistpelt," Wendell then meowed sharply. "I hate that you have to wait even longer before you get out of here. As happy as I am to be able to share this with you, you mean too much to me to have you be tied down here for longer than you thought - I'll make the process faster." He then closed his eyes and sighed. "Once... those kits of ours are old enough – you'll be ready to get out of here."

For several moments, I could simply stare back at the tom in stunned silence, being absolutely amazed by this gesture, to say the least.

I hate, hate, *hated* to make the comparison, however, I could be certain that a certain other tom would have *never* dropped so much to do something for me, let alone *any* cat. *Well, except...*

I shook my head quickly, shaking away all thoughts of what I had witnessed at the BloodClan battle, trying to focus more on the other countless ways I had been mistreated in the past, and all of the ways that I was being treated differently now – it was truly unbelievable. "Oh my goodness, Wendell. I-"

"Don't say a word, Mistpelt," Wendell insisted to me, his gaze full of tenderness. "Even before any of this happened, I should have been helping you already. I'm just doing what I should have already been doing."

I once again took a few heartbeats to simply look back into Wendell's pale blue eyes. And as I processed everything that had occurred during our conversation – a conversation that was now leaving me feeling so incredibly overwhelmed with strange feelings.

Feelings I had not felt for quite a while, and honestly didn't think I'd ever feel again. "Can I say a few words?" I whispered to Wendell.

"Of course," Wendell softly whispered back, his eyes gleaming.

Despite whatever the future between the two of us would ultimately be, I had to say it – especially when this time, it felt right. "I love you."

For a moment, Wendell's eyes flashed with surprise, but it didn't take long at all for his eyes to reflect all of the warm things I was currently feeling. And I found myself letting out big purrs as he pressed his muzzle into my neck, and stroked my belly with his tail. "I love you too."

And then, our words ended, and all we seemed to want to do was sit in silence, simply drinking in each other's scents as the sun continued to rise.

And as we stood there with our thoughts, I realized that weirdly, just like when I was a kit, my life had never felt so certain yet so bleak and terrifying at the same time.

Chapter 34

[image]

I was certain now that there was no worse form of torture than what I was currently experiencing.

For one, I was in the most physical pain I thought I had ever been in – I was practically gasping for breath as my stomach felt it was being ripped into two.

To be honest, I was shocked that any cat could endure even half of this and still be alive.

Even more so, because another tortuous aspect of this experience was the fact that I was currently in the grip of two different Twolegs – the ones that owned this house and had stolen me away, I assumed. I had never looked at them long enough to be sure.

One of them had their paws on my stomach, giving it long, slow strokes, while the other was lightly petting between my ears. I had to admit, it didn't feel like the worst thing in the world, but if I were in any stable condition, they probably would have lost that paw of theirs right now.

Something else horrible beyond comprehension was that Wendell, who I'd hoped would be right next to me to support me, was several fox-lengths away from my at the Twolegs' urging. He was supposed to be *right* next to me, licking my cheek to calm me down, twinning his own tail with mine, and telling me that everything was going to be okay. *I didn't get that opportunity or privilege last time, but I thought I was going to have it now...*

Because these kits were going to come at absolutely any moment now, and trying to bring them into this world today had already felt like an eternity.

Just out of the corner of my eye, I could see Wendell pacing back and forth from his far away spot. "Mistpelt, you are doing so well, I

promise," he called out to me, my spirits genuinely lifting when I heard his voice. I then heard him hiss as the Twoleg petting my head swatted him away. "You are so close!"

I was about to force out a reply to the tom's kind words, but instead had to let out a pained yowl as another surge of pain ran through my entire body, so unbearable that I almost thought I was going to fully black out for a moment.

I now had no choice but actually focus on the Twolegs' comfort as I continued to push – unfortunately, that's the only way this would end.

After taking the deepest breath that I could, I then tried to push with all my might, but at the same time, trying not to lose consciousness. *Oh, StarClan – goodness gracious, give me strength...*

I'm not sure if it was this prayer, Wendell's comforting and encouraging words from afar, or simply my desire to want this unbearable pain to end, but just moments later, I felt relief, and all of my pain seemed to disintegrate as I heard the Twolegs seem to let out cries of joy above me.

The next thing I knew, I went from complete misery to complete bliss and a soaring heart as one of the Twolegs then placed a single tiny sack in front of my flank. *Oh my goodness...*

It squirmed back and forth, and I couldn't help but just shake my head in amazement for a moment before urgently bending down and licking the thin coating away. You're safe, little one.

I then let out the loud purr that had been quickly rising in my throat as the two Twolegs seemed to back away, and simultaneously, a wonderful scent wafted over my as Wendell pressed his muzzle into my cheek, and gave me licks all over my face. "It's just the one, Mistpelt," he then meowed to me softly. "You did it."

I did it.

I then closed my eyes for a moment, simply drinking in my mate's

scent before looking back down at my newest kit, my heart still soaring. It was letting out small, squeaky mews as it seemed to paw its way around, trying to find its way to my flank. I let out a purr, using my fluffy tail to gently guide it towards me. After a few heartbeats, I then gave it some space to try and find my belly, letting myself simply stare at it in awe.

It was *perfect*, of course, and I was fascinated to observe that it was black and white, with the black's placement similar to where Wrenkit's brown tabby fur was – along its head and back.

At this realization, I couldn't help but feel a wave of sadness. *This truly would have been the most perfect day, and the most perfect moment if my firstborn daughter was with me, and was with me to see this.*

I then had to close my eyes for a moment. *And then to grow up with her sibling, teach it things, support it...*

I then forced myself to open my eyes again. *As horrible of a thought as it all is, I can't let them take away from this.* As I had told myself every day since I had been here – I just had to pray to StarClan that Wrenkit was alive and safe, and just hope that one day, by some miracle, maybe these two would meet each other. My two kits... I then thought in amazement. Two kits now...

I then found myself overwhelmed with love all over again as I looked back at my newborn kit, then bent down to give it a sniff.

And with that single sniff, I felt another wave of love, excitement, and complete happiness. "It's a tom," I then whispered to Wendell, my voice hoarse with emotion. "A son. I have a son."

"*I* have a son," Wendell then meowed, his head shaking back and forth in complete bewilderment. And as I then exchanged an amazed look with him, it hit me just how much of a big deal this likely was for the tabby tom – this was his first time being a father, *and having a real family...*

My heart swelling up with affection, I then gave my mate a lick on the head. "*Our* son."

"I can't believe it," Wendell then murmured as I pulled away.

At those words, I let out an amused sniff, giving him a teasing nudge. "Well, I'd work on believing it – we've got a kit to take care of!" I pointed out with laughter in my voice.

Wendell gave a roll of his eyes. "Oh, don't worry, I know, I just..." He then shrugged, his head still shaking back and forth. "I have a *son*."

I then felt my stomach twist in the most wonderful way as I watched the tom then take a deep breath, proceeding to look deep into my eyes, his own sparkling like the clearest stream on a sunny day. "I have a son with the most incredible, strong, and beautiful she-cat in the world, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it until it ends."

I could hardly take the tom's words. "Oh my goodness..." I breathed, closing my eyes and purring as Wendell then bent down his head to touch it with mine. But even with the sweet moment, I found myself having to push back several violent waves of sadness, with Wendell's latest words already echoing in my mind...

I'm going to enjoy every moment of it until it ends... I repeated to myself. *I don't even want to think about that yet. I can't.*

I then had to hold back a wail of distress. *Oh, why is my heart planted in two different places, and why is one still calling me louder than the other is?*

Still overwhelmed by the thoughts, I forced them away with a shake of my head, and trying to find comfort in Wendell's scent. "I will too," I then whispered to him. "Trust me."

"Then let's do it," Wendell then meowed tenderly, followed by him giving me a lick on the head. I then managed to let out another purr as he padded around me, lying down so that he could wrap himself around my own pelt. He then laid his head on my left shoulder, closer to where our son was. "So, do we have a name in mind yet?"

With that question, I let out a gasp of excitement. "I was going to

ask you the same question!" I exclaimed. "I was scared to pick out a name before we even saw what he looked like."

"Completely fair!" Wendell reassured me. I then watched as he slowly narrowed his eyes, giving his kit a hard look. "Hm... well, were you wanting to give it a Clan cat name? In case..."

I froze for a moment, trying to fight another twinge of regret as Wendell gave a shake of his head. "Well, you know..." he then murmured, his gaze shifting away from me for a moment. "Or, just to make you happy?"

I took a deep breath so that I could keep my reply to my mate from being shaky. "Oh..." I eventually mumbled. "But... I don't want to force that on you!"

"You wouldn't be!" the tabby tom immediately insisted.

"Yeah, but..." I then started, trailing off almost immediately as the two of us exchanged a knowing look with each other – one of both uncertainty and sadness.

I was thankful when Wendell finally broke it, shaking his head once again and gently stroking my belly with his tail. "Well, here, we can name it whatever we want, and if we decide later that we want to... to throw a *kit* at the end of it, it probably will work, right?"

After a long sigh, I gave Wendell a nod, genuinely loving that compromise. "I like that."

"Alright, then," Wendell meowed a bit more brightly as the two of us then exchanged a warmer look. "In that case, I..." He then let out a sniff. "I might have a name idea."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Oh, do you?" Then, it only took a moment of contemplation for my eyes to then narrow down in suspicion. "Uh, oh..."

"It's not an 'uh, oh,' I think..." the tom insisted. But to my amusement, after a moment, he seemed to think over his question more and want to backtrack. "...You may think it's silly."

I shook my head and immediately gave the tom a reassuring lick on the cheek. "You should know by now that I'm a pretty open book..." I then trailed off, looking back at the Twolegs and the living room behind me. "Well, in most cases..."

I then looked eagerly back at Wendell. "What did you have in mind?"

Wendell let out another sniff, shifting a bit in his spot next to me. "Now I'm almost certain that you're going to think it's ridiculous, but..." After a deep breath, he then nodded to our son. "How about Oreo?"

I simply stared back at the tabby tom for a moment. "Come again?"

"Oreo!"

"Say it again, please."

"I said *Oreo*."

"What in the name of StarClan does that mean?" I finally asked my mate, my voice full of laughter, not sure at all if he was trying to joke around.

"Well..." Wendell murmured, giving another shrug. "It's a bit of a long story."

"Ooo, I love a name with a backstory," I purred in reply before giving Wendell an affectionate nudge. "Trust me, I've got time."

"Well, okay..." Wendell began, my heart practically swelling just seeing how adorable he looked in his enthusiasm. "So, Oreos are actually something that I've seen our... *my* Twolegs eat. I've even had a lick of one before. They're almost like cheeseburgers, but they're smaller and sweet and delicious and crunchy, with a soft and sweet filling."

He then nodded towards the kitchen. "I always hear the Twolegs say something along the lines of what sounds like *Oreo* whenever they're eating them, and even the bright black box that changes pictures shows stuff about them, and I hear that *Oreo* word again."

He then shook his head in the most precious way. "Anyway..." He then nodded to our little kit. "Oreos are black, where the crunchy bread of the sandwich is, and the soft filling in between is white. So..."

He then looked back at me, giving a sheepish shrug. "As silly as it is... it was the first thing I thought of."

I continued to stare at the tom, trying to process everything he had just said to me. "Oreo."

"Yep."

"You're not making that all up to pull my tail?"

"I really don't think that would be very worthwhile for me right now..." Wendell then murmured, flashing me a half-nervous, half-affectionate glance.

I let out a purr, giving him a quick lick on the ear. "Well, in that case..." I then let out a sigh and glanced back down at my kit. *Oreo...* I then repeated to myself as I stared lovingly down at him. *It feels right. It really does.* "I love it," I then told my mate. "I really do."

Wendell gave a nod, his eyes gleaming all over again. "Good," he breathed. He then laid his head back on my shoulder, and I could hear a purr rumbling in his own throat as we both watched our son begin to suckle. "Oreo it is, then."

My little Oreo.

And as I continued to stare down at his perfect black and white *Oreo-looking* pelt, I found myself amazed for the second time in my life at how it was possible to have only been with a creature for a few heartbeats, and yet love it more than anything in the world and want to protect it with everything that I had.

But at the same time, already, as in love as I was, I also hated how much guilt I already felt just by glancing at my kit. I wanted to promise that I would always love him, and always be with him. Of course I would always love him, but could I promise the latter?

Just as *I* had no idea what my own future would hold, I had no idea what the future would hold for little Oreo. What would happen when the day came for me to leave? Despite everything, I was still certain that that was what I wanted to do. ThunderClan was where I belonged, and where I wanted to stay.

But a big, dire question would now haunt me with each new day that came – when I left, would I take Oreo with me, bringing him into so many potential dangers with the journey, or leave him here, safe with his father whose heart lied in this nest, but leave him forever?

Chapter 35

[image]

My heart was soaring, my fur tingling with excitement and affection as I adjusted the soft pile of fluff in front of me with my paws.

And as I saw the ecstatic little black and white fluff that was bouncing back and forth out of the corner of my eye. "Alright, Oreo. You ready?" I purred to my son, who had been waiting patiently for what I was sure had felt like several seasons.

As I had expected, the little tom immediately gave me an eager nod. "Yeah, yeah, yeah!" he practically squealed to me in reply. "Can I run through now?"

I quickly raised my tail up at my son. "Hold on, let me check one more time..." I murmured to me, fluffing up the white pile one more time as I then bent down to give it a sniff. *These are some of the weirdest things I've ever seen...* I thought to myself. *They're like little balls of snow, but they aren't cold. And snow doesn't smell this weird.*

I then lifted my head, giving Oreo a nod in confirmation. "Have at it!"

I then watched, my heart still swelling with love, as my son crouched down, wiggling his little rump back and forth as if to prep himself. He then ran forward, bursting straight through the fluffy balls and proceeding to let out an excited squeal as the balls flew everywhere and landed all over the basement.

I then had to let out a purr of amusement as Oreo then came to a stop, simply looking around in awe. "That was so fun!"

"I'm glad it's still fun after eight times!" I purred to my son, flicking one of the fluffy white balls with my tail.

"Nine, actually."

I let out a sniff, looking over my shoulder to follow the voice that I had just heard, and to give an affectionate look back at Wendell, who was dragging a red chair cushion towards my favorite basement window.. I was met with a warm, amused, yet sympathetic gaze. "Want me to take over for the tenth one?" the tom meowed a little more quietly to me.

"No, no!" I insisted to my mate as I then began to pad around the basement, gathering the fluffy white balls back into another pile. I'd barely started, but I hated to admit that I was already running out of breath. "I'm okay!" I then slightly lied.

As I had predicted, Wendell picked up on that *slight*. "Mist..." he then murmured, cocking a single eyebrow at me.

I sighed, knowing the fight wouldn't be worth it. "Okay, fine. We can switch."

"Thank goodness," Wendell breathed as he gestured to something deeper into the basement. "I was about to drag a cushion bigger than this one over here, and I was *dreading* it."

"Oh, you poor thing," I muttered as I gave a roll of my eyes. I then purred, padding up to Wendell and touching my nose briefly with his. "Thank you."

"Always," the tom then meowed gently, proceeding to touch his nose to my ear and then brush past me. "Oreo, can you help me gather all of these cotton balls?"

Ah... cotton balls.

"Totally!" Oreo immediately mewed, bringing me and Wendell to exchange a warm gaze. A kit that does what he's told is about all the two of us could as for!

I then let out a satisfied sigh, lying down on the cold basement ground and watching full of affection as I watched Wendell and Oreo begin to gather all of the *cotton balls*, putting them all into the pile I had started.

As they did so, the two toms seemed to be exchanging teasing

words to each other that I had a harder time hearing as they got deeper into the basement. Whatever they were saying to each other, it eventually led Wendell to let out a loud purr and then nuzzle Oreo's little head with his tail.

Then, as Wendell padded ahead to grab a cotton ball that was deeper into the darkness, Oreo looked after him, staring at his father with glittering hazel eyes full of admiration.

My heart could barely take it, and as simple as the sight had been, it meant so much to me to see the wonderful bond that my kit and his father already had – it already reminded me so much of my bond with Sparrow; a bond that could never be broken despite our distance from each other. In fact, I was certain that most of the strength that I'd carried since I'd lost him, was from Sparrow himself.

I could see that Oreo and Wendell had a bond just like this, *and yet... I'm considering breaking that bond...* I realized to myself, a shudder running down my spine as I suddenly had to hold back a whimper. *How could I even think about taking my kit away from his father?*

I then found myself closing my eyes, almost as if to block more worries and stress from flowing into my head. *And making Oreo choose, for some reason, seems even worse than me making the choice. Great StarClan, it's so hard to think about. I wish I could block it out forever.*

However, I then let out a purr, thankful for a timely distraction, as I noticed movement from Wendell's tabby brown pelt. I then had to hold back a *mrrow* of laughter as I noticed that he seemed to be sneakily grabbing one of the cotton balls on the floor, looking mischievously back at Oreo.

Then, when he was sure his son wasn't looking, Wendell gently pelted the cotton ball at his back. Oreo immediately let out a gasp when he was hit, whipping himself around to face his father. "Hey!" he yelped out. He then very *adorably* looked around for another cotton ball, eventually grabbing one himself and throwing it right back at Wendell. "Take that!"

Wendell, who had already been padding away to grab another cotton ball, paused as soon as Oreo's cotton ball hit his flank. I then suppressed laughter once again as the tom then slowly turned around to look at Oreo. "Did you just hit me with that cotton ball?"

"I did!" Oreo replied confidently. "Because you hit me!"

"Sure, but..." Wendell murmured as he slowly narrowed his pale blue eyes. "You *dare* strike me with something as dangerous as a *cotton ball?*"

Oreo hesitated for only a moment before he gave my mate another nod in certainty. "...Yeah!"

Wendell then began to shake his head back and forth. "Oh, Oreo, you've just made a huge mistake." I then raised my eyebrows as he crouched down. "Because when you hit the cotton ball monster with a cotton ball, you only make him stronger." Then, as Oreo began to knead his paws back and forth excitedly, Wendell let out a sniff and gave a lash of his tail. "I'd run while you still can!"

Oreo himself then crouched down, mirroring his father's exact position. "You'll never catch me!"

I then purred loudly as Oreo let out a loud yelp, pelting forward as Wendell began to chase him around the basement, the both of them actually very swiftly dodging the cotton balls that were still scattered around.

I then found my gaze falling on Wendell, his pale blue eyes full of affection and determination as he chased his son around. I immediately knew that he was not running at full speed to give Oreo some time to get ahead.

Even just realizing that, I found my heart swelling with love all over again as I continued to watch him – he was truly the best father and the best mate that any cat could ask for. *And... I wish more than anything that Wrenkit got to have a father figure like this. I hate that she didn't, and likely doesn't now.*

I then screwed my eyes shut once again, also hating the fact that

once I had been able to find someone *so* wonderful – someone that Sparrow and Chrissy would have *loved* and that *I* loved so dearly... I knew I had to leave him someday. Someday *soon*.

While Oreo's situation was uncertain, the fact that I was leaving Wendell *was*.

And whenever that day came, I would likely realized the full capacity I had of missing someone. I mean, I'd dealt with it before. *Four times too many...*

I then shook my head slowly. *No, five.* I then reminded myself. *I miss the Clans almost more than anything else, the "anything else" being Wrenkit...*

I then opened my eyes, my gaze immediately falling on the brown tabby pelt of my mate once again. *Oh, but Wendell, I love you so much...*

Another chill then ran down my spine, my thoughts overwhelming me and upsetting me beyond comprehension for the hundredth time today, surely. However, I always tried to be hopeful. *Maybe we could visit each other, even once I'm back in the Clans again?*

I then shook my head and stood up, needing a distraction once again. And I had to admit, I also was finding myself growing incredibly antsy as I watched my two loves run around the basement – I surely would have joined them if I'd had the energy. *Goodness, how did I ever manage to fight in the BloodClan battle so soon after I gave birth to Wrenkit?*

I then let out a sigh, continuing to try and distract myself by turning around to see Wendell's progress on the window contraption – the one that would eventually force me to actually make decisions, I suppose.

I then widened my eyes in surprise once I'd glanced at it for a few moments – I had known that my mate had been hard at work since we both found out that I was expecting a kit, but goodness, had he been *hard* at *work*.

It was clear that Wendell had been dragging boxes, cushions, and other junk from the basement and stacking it up like his life depended on it. It had also appeared as if he had even moved an old, rickety chair next to the pile so that he could reach up higher. *Goodness, he's probably developed some strong jaws having to haul all of this up...*

Because now, it looked like we were halfway to the finishing point. *Wow...*

I then let out a sigh, looking sadly back towards Oreo and Wendell. *Wow...*

I then flicked my ears in alarm, having taken a moment to process the fact that Oreo was now making his way up the stairs.

"Whoa, Oreo, please be careful!" I called out to my son, the words practically sliding out of my mouth instinctively. My heart was already pounding, because I knew that if Oreo was anything like I was when I was a kit, this likely wouldn't end well.

Wendell, who was just about a tail-length behind his son, looked back at me with a reassuring glance. "Don't worry, I'm right behind him if he falls." I then felt another wave of affection for the tabby tom as he helped Oreo climb up the next step. "Wow, you've got some strong limbs there, just like your mother!"

I then let out a little purr, my heart full all over again as I watched the two of them continue to climb together up the stairs, of course, Wendell slowing himself down once again for his son. And while I trusted my mate, I couldn't help but lock my gaze on my son's little black and white pelt as he continued in his mission.

And I let out a sigh of relief once he made it to the top. Oreo then let out a little determined growl as he excitedly lashed his tail back and forth and whipped himself back around to face his father. "Now I can run faster than ever away from that slippery floor!" I then raised my eyebrows as Oreo pelted away once again, disappearing deeper into the upstairs floor. "Come and get me!"

Wendell looked down at me briefly, his gaze full of affection and

amusement before he turned back around and replied to his son. "You asked for it!" he called out before also disappearing from my sight.

I let out a sniff, standing up and beginning to slowly pad towards the stairs, amused as I could hear their pawsteps thumping on the floor above me.

I had decided that I was going to make my way up the stairs and follow them, but I had only touched a couple of steps when I heard one of the worst sounds I could hear – the fearful meow of my son.

Of course, with that, I burst up the stairs and through the basement door, the adrenaline rushing through my blood and making me suddenly disregard any weakness and fatigue I was feeling.

Once I was upstairs and my paws met carpet, I frantically looked back and forth and began to follow the scents of my mate and my son. *Oh, no. Oh, no...*

With those two scents luckily being as fresh as they could be, I immediately found myself in the living room.

However, finding my son unfortunately didn't make me feel any better.

In front of me were the two idiot Twolegs that owned this house, but in between them were two other Twolegs that I had never seen before – one fully grown one and a Twoleg kit.

The adult Twoleg's days were numbered, because in its arms was Oreo, who wasn't attacking it by any means, but definitely was squirming uncomfortably in the Twoleg's grip. *Oh,* heck *no.*

A shiver ran down my spine, my fur bristling to make myself look double my size and my claws unsheathing and sinking into the carpet below. Luckily, in this moment, my anger and fierce protection over my son was fully taking over and making my blood boil. Otherwise, I would probably be wanting to sink down to the ground, overwhelmed by how similar this was to what I had dealt with once before.

However, unconsciously, I knew it was making this whole thing feel all the worse as I began to crouch down. "Hold my son for much longer, and you're going to lose those paws!" I growled up at the Twoleg, even though I knew it couldn't understand me.

I then pelted towards the four Twolegs, but immediately let out a violent hiss when one of "my" Twolegs shooed me away, seeming to speak to me in an angry tone.

Of course, these made me feel even worse. *How dumb are they if they can't understand why I'd be acting this way!?*

But I quickly tried to shake it off and pelt forward a second time. But unfortunately, my Twoleg was more ready this time, now physically grabbing me as I tried to leap into the air. I let out an enraged growl, fighting the grip as strongly as I had when I'd first been taken to this nest, and as strongly as I had when I'd been separated from my kit the first time.

As I had worried it would be, the Twoleg's grip was strong, however, as it began to carry me away. *No!*

Still wriggling back and forth with everything I had, I tried to look back at the three remaining Twolegs and my son, who was staring fearfully back at me. "Oreo, stay calm, my love!" I practically wailed back to him. "I'll come back and make sure that they stay away from you, I promise!" *Until then, stay alive!*

I then let out a growl as the Twoleg holding me than quickly and violently opened the door to one of the many rooms in the nest, proceeding to pretty much *throw* me inside. Prepared as always, I managed to make a good landing, but I still wasn't quick enough to run as the Twoleg then *slammed* the door in my face.

And as I heard that slam, everything in my world seemed to collapse for a moment. *All over again.* "No!" I then yowled as I pelted up to the door and began to scratch at it. "Let me out of here, you clammy-pawed, vile beast!"

I then let myself actually claw into the door, satisfied to see that my claws were leaving deep indents into the door. "I will scratch the

door until I make a hole in it, you idiots!"

I then whipped my head around, still scratching as I heard fast pawsteps behind me, and I was shocked to see Wendell quickly approaching me. "Mistpelt, it's no use."

I forced myself away from the door as I felt another immense wave of complete rage. I stared indigenously back at the tom, not even necessarily processing the fact that he was there, but rather that he was somebody that was telling me things that I didn't want to hear. "That's your favorite phrase, isn't it?" I barked back at the tabby. I then let out a huff and continued scratching at the door. "I should know that by now!"

I then heard Wendell's pawsteps get louder, and I could feel his long fur brushing against mine as he stood next to me at the door. "Mist!" he yowled at me, brushing his tail against my back. "Calm down, please."

"Don't tell me what to do!" I retorted as I then tried to leap up to the doorknob. After a few jumps, I actually managed to grip onto the knob with my paw, but wanted to rip it to shreds when I quickly realized that it wasn't going to twist. "Ugh, locked!"

"Mistpelt!" Wendell then meowed more sharply as I landed back on the ground. I then slightly cringed back as he touched his tail to my flank again. "Can you sit still for just a moment!?"

I then padded forward so that I was pretty much nose to nose with my mate. "You mean I haven't already been sitting still for *seasons*!?" I growled back at him.

But it was only a moment after that that I blinked in alarm and backed away, *shocked* by my own behavior towards the tom, the tom that had done nothing so far but try to get me to stay calm. And when I looked up and saw the hurt in his eyes, I immediately screwed mine shut and let out a frustrated sigh. My anger was completely justified, but putting it towards him was not in any regard. "Sorry."

I then let out a huff and turned away from the tom in shame. "Ugh,

I'm sorry!" I then meowed in frustration. "I just..."

Feeling another wave anger, I then thrust my paw into the door. "Why are they holding Oreo and not letting us be near him? Did they throw you in here too?"

To my relief, Wendell flashed me a look of forgiveness and understanding before giving me a nod. "I'd barely gotten to process the fact that they'd picked him up," he replied to me, his voice now tight with anger. "He ran ahead of me as soon as we got upstairs, and the next thing I knew I heard him yowl, and they'd snatched him."

"Idiots..." I muttered tautly as I shook my head. I then flashed my mate a concerned look. "Was it just me, or did you not recognize some of those Twolegs?"

I then narrowed my eyes, my stomach twisting with worry and dread as Wendell let out a sigh, breaking his gaze away from mine. "Not just you," he then nearly whispered.

Despite my concern, I shook my head quickly and continued, pressing the tom. "A-and *they* can be around our son, but we can't?" However, it didn't take me long to realize that Wendell's behavior was too strange to ignore. "What is wrong with you?"

Wendell gave the worst possible reply, simply murmuring an almost inaudible "Uh, oh."

With that, I was sure that I could feel my heart dropping to the carpet. "Wendell, if you don't follow that up, I actually think I'll have to break something in this room." And one good thing about this situation is, is that there are no Twolegs around to stop me.

To my surprise, Wendell then seemed to hold back a frustrated hiss as he glared at me. "Hey, I hope you realize that you and I are going through the exact same situation right now," he then meowed to me in a voice that was harsher than anything I'd ever heard from him. "I need to freak out and be confused and go crazy just like you do. And I can be certain – you'd rip my face off if I was talking to you the way you are to me. Especially when-"

I then tried my hardest to not rip into the carpet when my mate cut himself off. While I fully acknowledged what he said just said to me – things that were very true – the direness of the situation still made my tone towards the tom seem harsh. "When *what,* Wendell?" I then took a step closer to him, forcing myself to keep my voice more even. "Why did our Twolegs put us in here when those other idiots were holding Oreo?"

Wendell looked away once again, to my dismay. "I think you'll *actually* rip my face off if I tell you what I'm thinking."

I took a deep breath, making a final attempt to keep myself calm as I flicked Wendell's ear affectionately with my tail. "You know I'd never actually rip your face off. It's too nice," I meowed calmly to him before flashing him an only *slightly* teasing look, twinning my tail with his for comfort. "However, if you don't tell me what you're thinking, I'm ripping it double."

I then now forced myself to be silent, simply watching in a terrible, terrible anticipation as Wendell stared off, seeming to collect his thoughts as his pale blue eyes glowed with fear. "Mistpelt..." he eventually meowed. He then let out a shaky sigh and looked down at his paws. "I really didn't want it to be true, but... I'm worried by how familiar this looks."

Oh, no... "What does?" I gently pressed.

"The fact that other Twolegs are looking at Oreo and that we can't be there to see it... I think..." The tom then trailed off as he began to shake his head slowly, staring sorrowfully back at me. "I can't even say it..."

I can't even hear it... I thought to myself, because unfortunately, based on everything that was happening, the way that Wendell was acting, and idiotic Twolegs' horrible track record... I could guess where my mate was going with this. "Why not?" I eventually replied to him tautly, trying with everything I had to push down emotion. "I've gone through it once... what's one more?"

I then closed my eyes for a moment, giving my head a shake before meeting Wendell's devastated gaze that reflected everything that I

felt. "They're taking him from us, aren't they?"

Wendell didn't reply to me immediately, simply staring back at me as his eyes seemed to well up with both guilt and anger. I then was surprised as he eventually let out a hiss and began to pad around the room. "Ugh, I'm so stupid!" he growled. "I knew things like this happened with other cats that had kits. It happened to *me*, for goodness sake! I don't know if I truly didn't believe it would happen, or if I didn't *want* it to happen..."

"That is your reputation..." I muttered, not sure if the tom even heard me or not.

"Or maybe, I just didn't want to see your heart broken again..." Wendell then meowed, pausing in his pawsteps and giving me a soft, yet regretful look that made my heart split in half. "But... Mistpelt, I think these Twolegs are maybe here to see if... they want to take Oreo with them. Adopt him."

As I stared blankly back at him, he then lashed his tail towards the door that now had several of my scratch marks on it. "Our Twolegs know that the parents would object, so they just shove them out of the picture, until..."

I didn't even realize it until several moments later, but my unsheathed claws were now sunken deep into the carpet below me. "Until he's been taken away..."

I then felt my fur beginning to bristle, and I almost felt as if my sight and my head were completely fogging up from how angry I was. "*Taken away,* and *taken away from his mother and father!"* I then yowled I think louder than I ever had yowled.

I then ripped my unsheathed claws into the carpet, actually leaving a mark. "Why are Twolegs the most stupid, brainless, and selfish things on this earth!?" I then growled in rage. "Do they really think that we ourselves are just stupid, brainless things that can just be thrown around, taken, and locked away because *they* want to, and because *they* say so?"

I then found myself sinking to the ground, so overwhelmed with

anger and grief that I couldn't stand. "*Geez*, if I had the ability to, *I* would shove them in cages, put them in shelters, put them somewhere they don't want to be, and take their *kits* away from them so they can see how it feels!"

I then gave the door in front of me one last scratch before proceeding to completely collapse onto the ground in whimpers. And as I did so into my paws, hardly being able to take the pain, I tried to take comfort in the fact that Wendell was now next to me, stroking my back with his tail.

Of course, I felt guilt at the fact that I'd been so rude to him when I'd first gotten in here, when in fact, he was dealing with the exact same thing that I was – whether or not it was his first or second time didn't matter.

And I hoped I would be able to give *him* comfort soon enough, but for now, I found myself only being able to drown in my own grief as I continued to process what was happening.

Up until this point, I'd been wanting to rip my fur out at the thought that I would eventually have to choose the destiny of my son.

And now, I wanted to yowl in complete despair knowing that now, I didn't even get to make the choice.

Chapter 36

[image]

A gloomy light was leaking through the window of the guest room by the time that the door to it was finally opened, and Wendell and I were allowed to come out.

Of course, it had felt like the two of us had been in there for several eternities – scratching at the door, yowling at the top of our lungs to try and get someone's attention, trying to find a way out of the room, sitting in the middle of the room sharing our anger and sadness, and barely touching the food and water that the Twolegs would slip through the door.

And, at night, trying to sleep on the empty Twoleg bed that was in the room with each time the sun went down, darkening the room completely. This had only occurred a few times, and as we both had expected, neither of us had slept at all.

And I knew that I, as well as Wendell, was feeling a horrible, exhausting fatigue that weighed me down both physically and mentally as the both of us padded through the doorway.

Out in the hallway it was quiet and empty, and the latest scent of Oreo that I could catch was the same one from a few days ago, when Wendell had chased him out of the basement. *No...*

Neither me nor Wendell were going to waste our time searching the entire house, looking behind furniture and on top of tables and under beds to try and find our son. We were both smarter than that – we both knew that we might as well begin to cope with the fact that he was gone.

However, I did have the smallest bit of hope as I decided to peer into the living room ahead. But as I had worried there would be – there were our two Twolegs simply sitting on the couch, staring at the big bright screen in front of them like they'd just completed the most simple, mundane task ever.

They had no idea that they'd just taken a cats' entire world from them. It was horrible, *especially when one of those cats already thought that they'd lost their world...*

Overwhelmed with emotion for the hundredth time since Wendell and I had been shut away in that gosh-darned bedroom, I found I couldn't take another pawstep and had to sit down in my place, my head falling and looking down at my paws as if I couldn't carry the weight of it anymore.

I'd now lost both of my kits, and *both of them* to Twolegs.

And as familiar as this feeling of loss was – it never got better or got easier each time I experienced it. *How much more is there?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I could then see Wendell padding towards me. He seemed to have made a small attempt to see if Oreo was around by some miracle, but had quickly given up. I luckily managed to feel the smallest bit of comfort as Wendell stopped beside me, wrapping his tail around my back and resting his muzzle on my head.

And for a while, the two of us stood there in silence, the hallway looking especially gloomy despite the sun rays leaking through the window in the room behind us, and everything silent except for the birds chirping outside and the strange buzzing sound of the glowing box in the living room.

And I had no idea how much time had actually passed by the time I heard Wendell sigh, and I felt myself being pulled closer to Wendell with his tail.

I then found myself trying to meet his gaze as he let out another sigh almost immediately after, his eyes seeming to be glossed over with grief. "There really isn't much left here for you, is there?"

The words had barely been above a whisper, but ripped my heart in half as if he'd yowled them to me in rage. "Wendell, my gosh," I replied to the tom in shock as I wrapped my tail around his. "Please don't say that."

"But it's true," Wendell murmured a bit more loudly. And after he gave a shake of his head, I could hardly stand to look at his face when he finally lifted his head to meet my gaze. "Isn't it?"

I couldn't even answer for a moment, and even felt myself trying to push down frustration at the fact that my mate was bringing this up now. *But it can't be avoided.* "You're still here," I tried to tell myself as well as him.

Wendell then closed his eyes for a moment, giving another shake of his head. "But that's not enough," he sighed. And I couldn't even speak anymore as I then watched him shift his gaze towards the basement door down the hallway. "I don't expect it to be."

My heart felt as if it was sinking to the ground with Wendell's words, and at this point, a world that already felt split apart now felt as if it was being burned to ashes. *Now that his son is gone... is Wendell fully giving up on me before I have the chance to leave?*

Not being able to fathom that thought – being sent away from the cat I loved once again – I fully turned away from Wendell, having to pad away from the tabby tom to digest his words.

To my surprise, I heard his pawsteps immediately following behind me, and just a moment after that, he swiftly ran forward to intercept me and meet my gaze. To my relief, his pale blue eyes were soft. "Mistpelt, you know I love you more than anything," he reassured me, bringing me to look back at him with a weak warm gaze. "But as I've said before, I know where your heart truly lies."

I then raised my eyebrows in intrigue as he then let out a huff and looked off to the side. "And I love you enough to..."

"To what?" I pressed to the tom after I watched him hesitate for several moments.

After another few moments, Wendell took a deep breath and seemed to force himself to meet my gaze once again. "To send you away."

I found I could only stare at him with wide, dismayed, and shocked

eyes as he began to shake his head yet again. "As much as I want you here with me for the rest of my life, in the place that I feel that *I* belong, and as much as it hurts me to know that you are leaving, it..." He then sat down, winding his tail around mine once again. "It hurts me even more to see you trapped here, and see these Twolegs take so much from you and make you live a life that you don't want to live."

I already felt the emotion welling up in my eyes as I then felt him tighten his grip around my tail. "It's about time you went back to the place you belong," he then meowed huskily.

I slowly began to shake my head back at the tom. "But, Wendell..." my voice then broke, and I couldn't finish my words.

"I'm not wrong," Wendell immediately replied, his voice full of regret and sadness, but also full of certainty.

I gave the tom a shrug. "No, you're not, but..."

I then took in one of the shakiest inhales of my entire life as my gaze fell back down to my paws. "You've given me a reason to make it so much harder to leave."

"Well darn," Wendell then meowed, and I gave a sniff as he pressed his flank against mine and wrapped his tail around my back once again. "Should have held back the charm a bit."

I actually managed to let out a hoarse purr. I then let my eyes close in comfort as I felt him then lick my head. "And there's no way I can take that charm with me?" I asked Wendell, asking it as if I was presenting the most surface level question – I already knew what the answer was. *But it doesn't hurt to try...*

As I had expected, Wendell let out a longing sigh and gave a shake of his head. "Weirdly, I'd feel as trapped out there in the wild as you do in this house."

I had to let out another sigh. *Spoken like a true housecat,* I thought to myself sadly. *It's like he said about me – I've always known that this is where he belongs, but I didn't want to believe it.*

And now that I was facing the reality of it head-on, I was overwhelmed with the thought of it, and I found myself burying my head deep into Wendell's fur. "*Ugh*, I hate it."

"Trust me, I do too," Wendell then breathed as he ran his tail down my back.

"I *really* hate it," I then muttered.

"I know," Wendell murmured as he shook his head. "But I also know that you hate being away from the forest."

"I know," I then sighed, lifting my head from Wendell's fur and giving another shrug as if admitting defeat. "I really, *really* hate that too."

"*Really*?" Wendell then replied sarcastically, bringing me to let out another weak purr. And as our gazes met, his pale blue gaze began to glow with love.

I stared back at the handsome tom for several moments, likely for one of the final times as I then turned my head to look towards the window in the room we'd been held captive in.

Just seeing the sunlight leaking through it, and the leaves on the trees that shivered with the slight breeze, seemed to give me a rush of adrenaline, desire and excitement. Wendell was fully right.

In all of the places I had been in my life, the Clans were where I was the happiest. To be honest, it felt like the closest thing to my amazing, adventurous life as a kit – the place that made me feel most like myself aside from my life with my parents.

A place that made me feel like I belonged after I'd been in a place that had torn me to pieces, with cats that brought me up only to bring me down. After I'd been in a place where I relied on the love of and happiness from one cat, I'd found a place where I found happiness simply in the company of strong-willed and kind cats who stood proudly with everything they cared about.

The Clans were the first place that I never wanted to leave. As soon as I was put somewhere else after it, I wanted to leave it to go back.

It was a place that made me feel safe, and a part of my life that I didn't regret, and a place that didn't make me feel list. It was a place that even where I experienced sadness or loss, even when I knew that I wouldn't have my love or my kits with me, I felt that I still had so much.

And I had never, ever questioned if I wanted to return there. Even with the love that I had found here – real love – something that my thoughts hadn't wavered.

I knew it from the first day I'd been put in this house, and had known it every day leading up until now – I wanted to go back to ThunderClan. After all the time I had taken here, I was more than ready.

And somehow, I could immediately tell that Wendell saw this conclusion I had come to – I wasn't sure if it showed on my face, or if he just knew me that well.

Either way, he seemed to give an almost concluding nod. His eyes were solemn and regretful, but also full of determination. "Alright, then," he then sighed. I then watched as he closed his eyes for only a moment. "How strong are you feeling right now? Do you think you can drag and lift a few things back to back?"

"I absolutely can," I answered the tom as I stared at him curiously. "In fact..." I then looked to my side and let out a sigh myself. "I think I need to let out some pent up... energy. Why?"

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as Wendell quickly stood up and began to pad away. "Because we've got some work to do in the basement."

He then paused for a moment to look back at me. "Think we can get a lot done with the window if we really give it some time and work together?"

I let out an exasperated sigh. "I can only hope..." I then narrowed my eyes, repeating my last question. "Why?"

"Because we can be in the home stretch of your escape plan, if you

want to," Wendell then meowed softly. I then felt my heart melt with so much love, appreciation and tenderness as the tom then looked toward the same window I'd been looking at, his pale blue eyes glowing in the sunlight. "Hm... it hardly looks like sunhigh has even arrived. If we get started now, we can get you out of this house by tomorrow."

Chapter 37

[image]

"Alright, Mist, I'm throwing this up to you!"

"Ready!"

From the chair I was currently standing on, I gaped open my jaws and braced myself for the weight as I watched Wendell toss up a sturdy red sofa cushion up to me. I let out a grunt as I just barely was able to get it in my jaws.

Below me, I could see Wendell's eyes briefly flashing with panic. "Hold on! I'll be right there!"

You best.

I tried my best to keep my grip on the heavy object, attempting to just focus on Wendell's dark brown tabby pelt as he jumped up swiftly, first landing on the chair that I was on, and then leaping up just a couple of tail-lengths on top of a stack of other cushions and boxes. I then couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief as I saw him lower his head and open his own jaws.

With all of the strength that I could muster up, I thrusted the cushion up to my mate with a determined growl. I then let out another relieved sigh as Wendell made an impressive catch despite my flimsy throw.

As soon as I was sure he had it in his jaws, I then leapt up to where he was, and then leapt up another couple of tail-lengths to another stack of items. "Okay, throw it to me!"

Just a moment later, Wendell threw the cushion up to me, and now despite my growing fatigue and weakening teeth, I caught the cushion once again.

I'm almost done.

Now filled with a new rush of adrenaline and determination, I made sure that I had a firm grip and simply began to drag the cushion away from the edge of the box I was on. Once the cushion was fully on the flat top of the box, I readjusted my grip on it and simply scooted backwards until it was more centered on top.

I stopped once I didn't have many more room to go backwards, and I let out a huff and took a moment to catch my breath. *Geez Louise, how have we been doing this all night and all morning?*

"You alright up there?" I heard Wendell call up to me.

"Yeah..." I murmured in reply, immediately taking another deep breath. "Oh, yeah."

I then took one last leap, landing on top of the red cushion. Then, as I looked down from the top of our several stacks, I let out a sniff as I saw Wendell, who was now down on the basement floor. "Aw, you look so small down there."

Wendell also let out an amused sniff and tilted his head. "Am I seriously what you're looking at right now?"

I cocked an eyebrow back at the tom and gave a shrug. "I mean, you're pretty nice to look at."

He then rolled his eyes and purred. "Thank you, you're nice to look at too." I then watched curiously as he let out a sigh and flicked his tail, his eyes fill of certainty and sorrow. "But I'm just saying, you may want to look behind you."

Oh, dear.

For a moment, I could only return Wendell's look, almost not wanting to do as he said. I knew what I would find.

But at the same time, it was my excitement that finally brought me to turn around.

Right in front of my, there wasn't just a dark, sad wall in front of her. In fact, I was practically blinded by the morning sunlight as I was pretty much staring straight into the basement window – a

basement window that once stood several tail-lengths above me.

Here it was. My way out of here.

And now all that was standing between me and the rest of the world was a small lever on the window that would unlock it, and allow me to open it.

Below me, I could practically feel Wendell's anxious, anticipating gaze on me. And at this point, I could hardly stand to look back him, let alone look into his eyes.

It hurt even more now to hear him speak. "Well, all you need to do now is pull that lever to the right..." When I didn't answer, I heard his pawsteps padding up closer to our stack of things. "Right?"

"I..." I trailed off, trying to make an attempt to look back at him, but quickly realized once again that I couldn't. I then looked down at my paws and let out a shaky sigh. "I don't know..."

Almost immediately after my words, I could hear Wendell letting out an understanding grunt from below, and the next thing I knew, I could hear him making his way up to me.

And considering I couldn't even turn my head to look back down at him on the floor, I couldn't help but screw my eyes shut once he leapt up and landed beside me. "Hey, are you okay?" he murmured to me in a concerned, tender voice.

I immediately let out a sigh, almost happy that I was receiving an excuse to stand here longer. "Wel... it's all finally hitting me, I guess," I eventually answered.

I then opened my tightly shut eyes and forced myself to look at Wendell. And even after seeing the caring, yet dismayed look in his eyes, I forced myself to keep his gaze. "I can *leave*. Right now."

"Isn't that what you've wanted since the day you got here?" Wendell asked, quoting me on something I was sure I'd said countless times up until now.

I gave the tom a shrug as I then began to let my thoughts pour out.

"Most definitely, but... I guess it felt impossible for a while," I began. "So, I just seethed while I was under the assumption that I was here forever. It felt unbearable, but then we became close, and it wasn't as unbearable."

"Thank you?" Wendell purred as he cocked an eyebrow.

I let out a sniff, nudging my mate with my tail. "And then I found a way out of here, but then I found out that I was expecting Oreo, so even if I could get out of here, it wouldn't be for a while... and now he's gone, and we're here now, and..."

I then felt a heaviness in my heart as I flicked my tail ahead. "There's the window," I then breathed. "I now have the *choice* to leave when for so long, my mind was wired to think that I was stuck in here no matter what. I haven't thought about what it would be like to actually *be* out of here as much as I have just been trying to find a way to do it."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Wendell give a nod as he listened intently. "And now that I have... it's hitting me pretty darn hard." With each word that I spoke, I found my voice growing thicker and hoarser. "Now it's hitting me fully that I'm leaving you. And it's happening *right now*."

I'm not sure if Wendell had maybe been trying to suppress his emotions up until this point, or if things truly hit for *him* in that moment, but I turned to look at him again to find him closing his eyes and giving a slow shake of his head. "Hey, it doesn't have to be over just yet..."

I then watched, now feeling a twinge of curiosity as Wendell brushed past me, padding ahead of me towards the window. "I'll help you open this window, and I can walk you outside."

For a moment, I couldn't even speak as I was filled with so much love and gratitude. "I'll take it," I nearly whispered before following the dark brown tabby tom.

I then sighed as I followed Wendell, pausing for a few heartbeats and watching as he unlatched the knob on the window and

proceeded to slide it open.

And as the outdoor air was able to flow inside, I couldn't help but immediately close my eyes in pure bliss as the outdoor smells and the breeze seemed to take over my senses, flooding through my nostrils and lightly brushing my fur. *Wow...*

I then opened my eyes after a few moments, quickly feeling a wave of sadness as I met Wendell's regretful, but certain and reassuring gaze.

"Come on," he then meowed quietly to me. "No reason to not let you fully enjoy it."

I then was overwhelmed with emotion as Wendell stepped to the side, allowing me to slide outside of the window before he did. And after taking a deep breath, I padded forward towards it. It didn't even feel real – *it's like I'm in a dream, and I'm going to wake up in that stupid cat bed upstairs at any moment.*

But before I crawled through, I paused for a moment as I met Wendell with a warm, but immensely dismayed gaze. *But I'll miss sharing that stupid cat bed with him...*

I then brought myself to crawl through, closing my eyes once again as my paws touched the soft grass. Sure, I had been able to touch grass several times when I went into the backyard, but something about this grass – grass that wasn't surrounded by a fence or was tainted with Twoleg stink – felt like nothing else.

And just like I had that one early morning when I'd been wandering around in the Twolegplace, away from BloodClan's camp, I couldn't resist the temptation of letting out a purr and letting myself roll in the grass – enjoying its wonderful smell and its touch.

I could quickly hear Wendell's amused purrs as he followed me outside. "See – if there's ever a doubt in your mind that you *shouldn't* have left this house, I think you should reconsider just by remembering this moment."

"Oh, don't worry!" I purred as I rolled over onto my stomach.

"There's no doubt."

"That's what I thought," Wendell meowed evenly before letting out a long sigh. "How does it feel?"

I could tell that Wendell was trying to appear as chipper as possible as I stood up and padded towards him. "Better than I ever could have thought. Again..." I then let out a huff and shook my head in disbelief. "It's *all* just now hitting me." *I am free!* I thought excitedly to myself. *I am actually free, after so long. I can return to the Clans now... find Wrenkit... it all feels too good to be true!*

I then pulled myself away from my thoughts as I noticed Wendell nod. "Good!"

I then felt my heart sink as he then let out a sigh and sat down, almost as if he was finally letting himself relax after trying with all of his might to hold them in. "Good..."

I then watched sadly, feeling my heart now seem to slowly break in half, as he closed his eyes and seemed to take several moments to collect himself. "Gosh, am I going to miss you, Mistpelt," he then meowed out in a voice barely above a whisper.

Oh no, not this.

My legs were now practically shaking from all of the sadness and emotion that was now flowing through my blood. "And that goes both ways, Wendell. You have no idea," I breathed, my voice shaking just as much. "I will think of you every day."

"And me you, *trust* me," Wendell meowed softly, his voice even but his eyes full of sorrow. "It will bring me so much joy just to think of you running freely through the forest – your Clanmates, and maybe even your daughter at your side."

Still overwhelmed with emotion, I let out a sigh and bent my head forward to touch it with the dark brown tabby tom's. "I promise you – somehow you'll hear about it. One day I'll try to find my way back here and visit you."

To my surprise, Wendell let out a snort at my words. "Oh, I am

certain that once you're back in ThunderClan, going anywhere else, let alone the *Twolegplace*, isn't going to be at the forefront of your mind."

For a moment, I could only stare back at the tom, shocked. But before I could protest in any way, he began to shake his head and put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "I understand. I won't expect it." He then pulled his head away from mine as he stroked my face with his tail. "All I expect you to do is go *home*. Go to the place that you belong and makes you happy."

Before I could protest again, I actually stopped myself, feeling my heart break all over again as I looked deep into his reassuring gaze. "I'll be okay," he then whispered.

I remained speechless for a few heartbeats, although I almost wanted to let out a yowl to somehow let out all of the remorse and grief that was overwhelming me so much I wanted to collapse.

But instead, all I found that I could do was touch my head to Wendell's all over again. "Oh, Wendell... thank you for everything," I nearly cried out to him. "Thank you for appearing with... all of your *snarkiness* when I first got here and tried to break open an unbreakable window, which surely would have caused me to hurt myself a lot."

Wendell let out a chuckle as he nuzzled his head into mine. "Well, when you see a really pretty cat causing mischief in your house, you just *have* to see what is going on. Good thing I did too."

He then pulled his head away again, and I was met with affectionate, warm, and sparkling pale blue eyes. "Think things turned out pretty well for the two of us, huh?"

They did, I then thought to myself as I brushed Wendell's cheek with my tail. *Too well. If I had just remained apathetic towards him, leaving like I'd always wanted to would be so much easier, Great StarClan!*

I then gave my head the slightest shake. I wasn't even sure if Wendell noticed it. *It would have been impossible. Not finding affection*

for a cat like Wendell is impossible, I then thought to myself. *And anyway, he – along with the son he brought me - is the reason that I will be able to look back on this time of my life fondly.*

And why I will now understand the kind of love I really deserve. That romantic love like what my parents has really exists, for StarClan's sake!

"Wendell, thank you for showing me what true love is like," I then told the tom out loud. "For a while, I didn't think it was possible."

Wendell gave me a single nod, one of the most sincere I'd ever seen. "Thank you for giving me the opportunity."

As much as I could have said after that, I found myself holding back, simply staring into the tom's pale blue eyes for several moments, making sure that I would never, ever forget that warm, loving look. *While searching for love is not something I will be prioritizing in the future, if at all, I want to be sure I remember him, and remember this, and what I should look for.*

But also, I knew that this might be the last time that I ever see Wendell – this tom that I had such a deep love for, and had been my saving grace in the last several moons.

Words couldn't encompass how much he would mean to me, forever. "I love you so much," I then whispered to the tabby tom.

"I love you too, Mistpelt. More than absolutely anything." Wendell immediately replied. I then watched sadly as the tom them squinted his eyes, raising his gaze up to the sky. "It... it looks like it's nearly sunhigh now. You'd better head out and get a good start before it gets dark."

He then seemed to hold back a gasp as he gave an alarmed flick of his ears. "You don't even know how far you're traveling, do you?"

I widened my eyes back at the tom. "Wow..." I then let out a snort. "I guess I don't!"

Wendell then gave me a teasing look, and for a moment it was almost as if our last few words hadn't happened... as if it was just a normal day in the nest when he nuzzled my head with his tail,

causing me to purr. "Ha, that's okay," he meowed warmly. "I *might* be able to give you a start."

I nodded eagerly as he peered ahead of me. "Very luckily for you, our house is pretty close to the edge of this Twolegplace," he muttered as he thought out loud. "I wish I could be sure of where ThunderClan was, but they live in the forest, right? A forest begins in this direction eventually if you just keep going."

I gave the tom a single sharp nod. "Then that is where I shall try first!"

But almost immediately after my words, I gave a quick shake of my head as if to take them back. "As soon as I find Wrenkit," I told Wendell. "The Clans are her home as well as mine, and my journey would never feel complete unless she were with me."

I was now the one flicking my own ears in alarm, and I flashed Wendell a dismayed gaze as I meowed, "And Oreo-"

"Will be on my radar constantly," Wendell insisted to me, his eyes full of certainty. "If I find him, he will be here with me, right here if you ever can manage to visit."

But... is that enough for me? I thought to myself initially. *What a joy it would be to have both of my kits together... but...*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath and think more rationally. *I can't keep Oreo from his father, or from the only kind of life that he knows... oh, but it hurts. It hurts so much...*

I then had to close my eyes for a moment, realizing that after some moons, I'd finally been able to make a decision on my son's destiny.

I then opened my eyes again when I felt Wendell's tail touch my shoulder. "I can promise you that Oreo is safe, even though our Twolegs were idiotic to send him away from us," the tom tried to convince me. "I'm *certain* that he is living comfortably in another one of these nests just like I am."

I simply stared back at Wendell for a moment. "You're sure?"

"I am," he replied simply. And as worried as I still was, I knew I believed him. "I promise."

I nodded back at him once again, more slowly and hesitantly this time. "Okay..." I breathed, now having to cope with the fact that I may never see my son again. *But at least I will know that he is happy and safe, and that it all that matters.* "If you see him, please tell him that I love him so much."

Wendell nodded right back at me. "I would have even if you hadn't told me to."

I then practically had to hold back a whimper as he looked up at the sun once again, his eyes wiping over with sadness. "Now, go," he urged me softly. "Go and find your daughter, and go and find your Clan."

It's really happening...

All I could simply do at first was give a weak nod as I forced myself to begin to pad away from the tom, and the love of my life. "Goodbye, Wendell."

"Goodbye, Mistpelt," Wendell called out to me as he began to pad back towards the basement window, his eyes still dismayed, but now seeming to glow with excitement for me. "Good luck."

I then gave another weak nod, hardly being able to handle my emotions as I held Wendell's gaze for just a few more moments, and then watched in complete sadness as he crawled back through the window, his tail disappearing into the darkness of the basement.

And that was that. *Goodbye, Wendell. I love you.*

I then shut my eyes for a moment, a shudder running down my spine. *And goodbye, Oreo, my sweet son.*

For a moment, I couldn't even move, and for a moment, only for the briefest moment, did I feel a pang of regret.

I had literally said that Wendell had shown me true love, true support and true companionship. After all of the belittling,

ridiculing, and abuse that Scourge had shown me, why would I let this go?

Thank StarClan, for me, the answer to that came as quickly as lightning strikes the ground in a thunderstorm. *Because as amazing as it all was, for me, that isn't what I necessarily seek out in life, is it?*

Adventure, freedom, and being a wild cat was.

If love was something that stumbled along the way for me – great, but it wasn't mattered to me. Losing this amazing love was a sacrifice I had to make to get this adventure and freedom I sought out. And I'm about to have it.

And as this thought hit me, it almost seemed to create the adrenaline and determination that then seemed to rush through my blood and bones, and finally brought me to begin padding away from the house. As I did so, I did not look back at all – it wouldn't do anything good for me.

I was filled with both a sensation of wanting to yowl out in grief, and a sensation of wanting to squeal in excitement and pelt ahead as my freedom, as well as what I was leaving behind, continued to process.

But right now, I couldn't focus on either of those. *Wrenkit is somewhere out there,* I told myself. *Great StarClan, where will I even start?*

Of course, I hoped that I would eventually be able to find my way back to where I currently was in order to find my way back to the forest, and *of course*, I also hoped that I wouldn't be found by some other idiotic Twolegs and be taken into their idiotic nest.

But these were just the risks I'd have to take if it meant finding my daughter one day. I was *more* than willing.

I then paused in my tracks, letting out a startled yelp as I ran straight into something that was in front of me – something so embarrassingly obvious that I'd missed when I was deep in my own thoughts.

I gave a shake of my head and my fur and then backed away, and was shocked to be looking at a large bundle of tall lilies – fully bloomed, bright orange, fiery and beautiful lilies.

And as the breeze brought them to slightly quiver, I was met with the flower's wonderful smell – sweet like any other flower, but definitely a scent that had a sharper sort-of *tang* to it – it was one of her favorites aside from lavender.

As the light breeze continued, it was blowing the lilies so that they were leaning slightly to my right – the direction the wind had been blowing since I left the basement.

So, of course, I was more than surprised when the wind *very* abruptly changed course, causing the lilies to blow in a totally different direction within half a heartbeat. They now were blowing *away* from me completely.

Not only that, but the wind was suddenly blowing so strongly that the lilies were completely leaning over, almost as if they were *pointing*?

...pointing straight towards the direction that Wendell had sent me to, I then realized as a chill ran down my spine. *Towards the forest.*

Almost simultaneously as I came to this realization, I was then filled with a weird, once again *abrupt* and *sudden* sense of ease and certainty.

I knew that this was no coincidence. Not at all.

Now feeling completely shocked, I stared at the blowing lilies for a moment before staring past them into what would eventually lead to the forest.

I now was certain – whatever it was, StarClan maybe, it was telling me to go straight into the forest, and to find the Clans first.

Chapter 38

[image]

I had only been traveling for about a full day before I began to recognize my surroundings. I could hardly believe it.

I could've been trapped in a Twoleg nest that was right outside of ThunderClan's camp and I would have been miserable, however, I never would have expected that the place I was taken to was so close to my home.

Wendell had been correct – and the trees that I used to only be able to see from the distance before, were now towering above me in the form of a forest. *A forest of oak trees.*

While I hadn't been in this specific area for a while, I recalled it as clearly as I could if I had been here yesterday. *The last time that I found my way here was... just days after I lost Chrissy and Sparrow*, I realized, my heart now seeming to weigh down my already tired paws. *One of the times I'd never felt so alone and lost...*

I then took a deep breath, trying to cope with my immense grief. *And I suppose I'm alone now... and a little lost,* I thought with a snort. *But soon, I won't be alone, and I've never had a problem with being lost.*

I then began to shake my head in amazement, lifting my head up to look at the branches above, and the morning sun leaking through their leaves. *I really am back at the beginning, aren't I? Back to wandering about.*

As I then took another moment to breath, slightly padding in a circle as I took a gander at my surroundings and felt a wave of nostalgia. Suddenly, I saw images of the life that Sparrow, Chrissy and I lived when I was just a kit – traveling all day and discovering what felt like every kind of place or habitat that could exist. We'd hunt whatever was in the area, trying new kinds of prey, and spend the evening as the sun set trying to find some place to sleep.

For a moment – and just a moment – I almost was tempted to take my time returning to the Clans. While returning to ThunderClan didn't feel like something that was trapping me, it almost sounded nice to spend a few final days living the life that I'd known for so long, and the life I'd spent with two of the most wonderful cats I'd ever know.

But I knew that I couldn't.

I then almost felt guilty for a moment, just at feeling the slight desire to take my time. *Not with that sign I received yesterday*, I reminded myself. *And not with Wrenkit still out there. How selfish would I be?*

With those thoughts now swirling through my mind, I found myself practically pelting ahead now. If those lilies that were pointing towards the forest meant anything at all – and they'd better – *I have to get to the Clans as soon as possible.*

But why? I then asked myself, slowing down just a bit to a fast-paced trot. *Is ThunderClan meant to help me find her?*

I felt my eyebrows furrow. *If that's the case... does that mean that it was StarClan that sent me that sign?*

I then came to almost a complete stop, taking a moment to ponder that question before beginning to travel again. *Goodness, as wonderful as Clan life is, it's much more complicated,* I then thought. *Either way, I can be certain that my Clanmates will help me if I tell them I still haven't found Wrenkit.*

Now feeling a bit more at ease, I traveled on, every once in a while feeling a chill run down my spine as I recognized certain things – some things even as small as singular shrubs, trees, or clearings. It was crazy to think that at the time I'd first been in this area, I 'd had no idea that I'd been so close to such a fantastic group of cats.

And thankfully for me, as I padded deeper into the forest, and as the sun almost seemed to be following me as it moved across the sky, the memories that I began to associate with the areas surrounding me were becoming more "fond."

I was beginning to recognize places that I had crossed through with Chrissy and Sparrow – places that I actually recognized a bit more vividly since I had been a bit older. *And so close to losing them too...*

I then gave a quick shake of my head. *Don't think of it that way*, I tried to tell myself. *I should feel a connection to them here.*

I then took a deep breath, pausing in my steps once again as I simply took a moment to look around the area – an area I recognized fully, as it was where we had explored when I first dragged them into the forest. *Goodness, I should have known then that the forest was my true home. I wonder if we ever would have decided to settle in a place like this?*

Truthfully, I doubted that Chrissy or Sparrow would have ever considered staying in one place, especially while they were still so young. *Young... and just about the same age that I am now...* I realized, another chill running down my spine.

But once again, I pushed myself to pad forward. *But here I am, and even though I'll be settling in the Clans, I'm going to live a life full of all the adventure that they would've wanted to have. And maybe this trip back to the Clans will be the last few days I embrace the kind of life we lived.*

Now feeling a new rush of determination, I picked up my pace once again, now trying to grasp at different memories from the past in order to figure out where I was going.

However, if anything, I knew that I was indeed in the outskirts of the ThunderClan forest.

At least, what was left of it.

While I was already beginning to catch the faintest scent of what I luckily still remembered to be ThunderClan, and while the oak trees above me brought me ease with their familiarity...

That faintest scent of ThunderClan was very, *very* faint, and the familiar oak trees above me were becoming fewer and fewer.

As it hopefully would with any cat in my situation, this took several

heartbeats to register. *Oh, no...* I then thought after those several moments of complete blank. *What has happened here?*

Despite my unease, I continued to push forward – the soft grass below me now beginning to feel rough and dry, and the trees above now almost nonexistent.

In fact, the lacking trees above were what I was still looking at by the time I realized that my paws were no longer touching grass. In fact, I let out a startled yelp when the fronts of them touched something rocky and hard. *Oh no, oh no...*

I slowly forced myself to look down, and my heart seemed to sink down to the rough concrete as my eyes fell on the thunderpath below me. A completely fresh one that I would guess had only been around for a couple of seasons at most – it looked sleek and didn't have many cracks in it.

And as much as I just wanted to hope that I was in the wrong place, I learned long ago that living in denial is *not* the right way to go.

However, at the same time, denial is what brought me to actually cross the thunderpath, push forward, and try to hope for the best.

But it was thunderpath, after thunderpath, after thunderpath, with newer, very clean-looking buildings and nests spread about in some places. *Geez...* I thought as my stomach beginning to twist up with worry and nerves. *How have the Clans even managed to live around this?*

I then stopped abruptly in my tracks again, *Uh, oh.*

I then found myself pelting forward, now haunted with a single, terrible thought. *That is, if the Clans have even managed to live around this at all.*

I don't know how I managed it – maybe Chrissy and Sparrow had some good genes and some good noses – but through all of the gross Twoleg odors that were flooding through my nose, the gasoline, the concrete, and the lumber that did *not* do justice to the wonderful smell of trees – I was able to grasp the slightest, faintest scent of my

friends and my home.

The ravine was just *tail-lengths* away, I knew it.

And sure enough, only after a few very quick pawsteps forward, and after crossing yet another new thunderpath, there it was.

Empty, and completely destroyed.

~>~>~>~>~>~

I have no idea, genuinely, how long I stood in that same place, my heart pounding in my ears and my legs practically shaking as I stared down at what I once knew to be ThunderClan's ravine – ThunderClan's home.

But I was standing on one of the only ledges that could even be considered an "edge" to the ravine. Everywhere else has basically collapsed in, and large boulders and stones had piled up at the bottom of the ravine, mangled with tree branches, leaves, sticks, and moss.

A chill ran down my spine at this sight. I was certain that under those piles were dens – dens that had once been so full of life and activity.

All of this had once been a ThunderClan camp that was so full of life and activity. And just by the sight of the new buildings, thunderpaths, and the stupid yellow Twoleg monsters that were surrounding the ravine, I knew that this had been the doing of Twolegs. *Shocker*.

I'd barely noticed them when I first arrived at the ravine, my shock blocking out all of the brightly-colored vehicles and the deep, horrifying, rumbling sound that they made, but there they were, and they *had* been there the entire time that I was. Surely to make more buildings and more thunderpaths...

I felt my claws slowly unsheathe and sink themselves into the rough grass below me. *These idiots snatching away cats from this forest was just the beginning...* I then realized as I felt a growl beginning to rise in my throat. *That's the reason why Wrenkit and I were taken. This was*

their attempt to get rid of us before they completely wiped out our home.

I then whipped myself around, a growl finally escaping my jaws as I couldn't stand to look anymore. It was too much, to say the least.

I then took a deep breath, giving another violent shake of my head as I made an attempt to calm myself down. *Did they snatch away every Clan cat before this happened? No way. As selfish as they are to take some of us, I can't imagine they'd take that much time to clear everyone out. They'd...*

I then screwed my eyes shut for a moment. *They'd clear out some, and just hope that the others find their own way out while they do as they please...*

I then held my breath as I briefly peered over my shoulder back at the ravine. *Oh, please, StarClan, don't let there be any ThunderClan cats at the bottom of those rock piles...*

I then shook my head once again. *No. That is much too horrible to be true.*

In fact, it was too awful to even *begin* to fathom. First off, to lose the entirety of ThunderClan, and to experience *this* amount of loss, and to lose such a wonderful, resilient, powerful, and strong group of cats, was absolutely heartbreaking.

And with that, it would leave me without a home. *At least, the one place that felt like home to me...*

But weirdly, as wonderful as the ravine had been to me, losing that wasn't even the problem for me. *The* cats *in it were my home...* I then realized. *And if they're all gone, what will I do? I mean, I could go right now to search for Wrenkit... then maybe take her back to Wendell with me?*

I then shook my head, feeling a wave of sadness. *I feel I can be certain that neither of us would be happy with that. As much as I miss Wendell so, so dearly...*

I then slowly began to narrow my eyes, my head and chin also slowly rising. *But you know what I can also be certain of?* I then asked

myself. *I mean, I said it myself – with as wonderful, resilient, powerful, and strong that ThunderClan is, there is no way that they would let this bring them down. At least, I would hope.*

I then gave a single, determined nod. *I have to find out where they are. But how?*

It honestly didn't take me long at all to ponder that question, and the answer actually filled me with the same wonderful amount of ease, excitement, and comfort that that it always did. *Barley*, I immediately thought. *He has to know what has happened to the Clans, but also...*

I then found myself sitting down, now overwhelming with so much guilt and grief. *I miss him more than I would have ever thought possible. I haven't seen him since a few days after the BloodClan battle*, I realized. *I have to see him. He's been there for me since the beginning, and I don't want to stop now.*

I then found myself pelting forward, amazed by how certain I was of what direction I needed to go in after so long, but terrified to see what I would find once I got to the barn that I loved so much. *And if for some reason all of this really is the worst case scenario, StarClan forbid that these idiot Twolegs brought Barley and Ravenpaw down with the rest of the cats.*

Chapter 39

[image]

Thank StarClan, Barley's barn hadn't been touched.

Along with everything else too. If any Clan cat arrived to this barn, turned their back from the rest of the forest and faced the barn, they could just pretend that their territories hadn't ever been bothered. *And to prevent myself from losing all hope, I think I'm going to do that...*

And after letting out an amused snort, I managed to feel a rush of excitement and ease at the sight of the white wooden panels, the straw surrounding them...

And of course, the small hole in the barn that led to the cozy, comforting inside. *And now, here's to hoping that Barley and Ravenpaw are even in there.*

After a deep breath, I proceeded forward towards the small entryway, still a bit winded from the travel here. Weirdly even despite the destroyed Clan territory, there had been little landmarks here and there that had brought me the confidence to go forward. *After all, I used to come here all of the time...* I thought sadly as I came to the little barn entrance. *But with how much time I've lost, all of the time doesn't seem like nearly enough.*

I then crawled through the small opening, my heart pounding in my ears with fear and anticipation.

But as I made it inside of the barn, my heart then felt as if was practically soaring as my eyes immediately fell on the black and white pelts of both Ravenpaw *and* Barley, who seemed to be settled in the middle of the barn sharing a mouse.

I could hardly believe I was being blessed with something so wonderful. *But now it's time to make up for all of it.* "Um..." was the first thing I could force out through the silence.

I then felt the smallest twinge of nerves as my voice brought them to both shift their gazes towards me, their eyes both full of confusion and surprise. "Room for one more in here?" I then murmured shyly.

As soon as I had spoken, Barley's eyes might as well have widened to a size bigger than his entire head, and his mouth dropped as if he were a kit who'd just had the biggest mossball put in front of him. "Ravenpaw, you see her too, right?"

Ravenpaw stood up with Barley, letting out a sniff. "You may be crazy, but you certainly don't hallucinate!"

As a purr began to rise in my throat, Barley gave a quick shake of his head. "Good, just making sure!"

My purr then erupted as the black and white barn cat pelted towards me. "Mist, my gosh, please come in!"

"You don't need to tell me twice!" I exclaimed before meeting Barley and digging my muzzle into his neck fur. "Oh my goodness, Barley, it has been so long."

"It has," Barley then meowed warmly as he nuzzled my head with his tail. "We really have been saying that each time we see each other, haven't we?"

I let out another purr, pulling away and looking into the tom's warm blue eyes. "Sad, but true!"

And after the two of us exchanged an excited, pleased glance, something that I could still hardly fathom was happening, Barley let out another purr and seemed to use his tail to beckon me deeper into the barn. "Come on in, Mist!" he repeated to me, something that his excitement and eagerness probably didn't make him realize. "Do you need anything? Do you want the rest of our mouse?"

I then widened my eyes as Ravenpaw seemed to let out an exaggerated, taken-aback gasp. "Barley, are you assuming I was done with it?"

Barley then shot his friend a similar taken-aback glance.

"Ravenpaw!"

"I'm kidding, Barley!" Ravenpaw then purred, flicking Barley's ear, and his eyes clearly glittering with amusement at his partner's enthusiasm. He then nodded to me. "Mist, take that mouse, and any other in this barn that you need."

My eyes then widened, for some reason still being shocked by their incredible generosity after all of these moons. "Oh, thank you both, but are you sure?"

"Please!" Barley exclaimed, flicking his tail towards the mouse they'd only seemed to have taken a couple of bites out of. "Sit down, help yourself! We'll sit with you, if you'd like company."

I began to shake my head in amazement, feeling so, so full of warmth and happiness just being in the presence of these toms, and being back in this barn after so long. "Thank you so much," I meowed. I then settled down and let out an amused snort. *Goodness, Barley is in such a caretaker mode,* I thought to myself. *Just like he was each time me, Chrissy, and Sparrow came by...*

I then had to hold back a shaky sigh. *It's almost as if no time at all has passed... it's just like old times.* "By the way..." I then meowed, pulling myself out of my thoughts. "Just so you know, I don't think I'd come here if I didn't want company!"

Both Barley and Ravenpaw exchanged an amused look as they also settled down in the hay. "Well, fair enough," Barley muttered, pushing the mouse they'd been sharing towards me. He then let out what sounded like an exhausted huff. "My gosh, Mist, I cannot tell you how wonderful it is to see you. Ravenpaw and I have both been worried sick."

"Worried sick?" I asked Barley through a full mouth of my first bite. I then swallowed before speaking again. "How come?"

Barley then began to shake his head, and exchanged another look with Ravenpaw. "Well, the two of us heard about you and Wrenkit being taken by a Twoleg just about a day after it happened – ThunderClan had sent out search parties, and we were one of their

first stops," the tom began, my eyes widening as he spoke. "They told us you were missing, and while they'd known a Twoleg had taken you, they had no idea where you could've gone."

I then felt a wave of sympathy and sadness, watching as Barley let out a sigh, closing his eyes as he continued to shake his head back and forth.

Ravenpaw stared back at his dear friend worriedly for just a few moments, placing his tail on the tom's shoulder, before looking back at me. "We actually helped them to search around the area, even veering a bit closer towards the big Twolegplace, but nothing," the black tom continued. "And as you can imagine, then hearing about days of absolutely no luck was terrible."

Barley then seemed to let out a huff, shaking out his fur before picking up the story again. "Yeah, I mean, of course, we could try and hope that you'd just been taken to some shelter somewhere, but even *then* I was worried – I knew you'd hate something like that."

All of us then exchanged purrs of amusement. He really does know me well...

"So, geez, Mist, what happened?" Barley then pressed. "Did those dumb Twolegs take you somewhere? How did you escape?"

I then flashed him a look of concern as he let out another sigh, closing his eyes briefly once again. "Gosh, thank goodness you are okay."

And with those words, my heart felt as if it were physically swelling with warmth. No words of mine could ever begin to describe just how touched I was to see how much Barley cared. *Just as much as he would as if he were my own father...* I realized. *Any cat would be so thankful to have a cat like this in their life.*

After flashing the tom a look full of reassurance, I answered him. "Did they ever!" I groaned. "I was actually in the shelter for only *one* night before two dumb Twolegs came and grabbed me. They took me to their nest, and I was stuck there for *moons* and *moons*."

I then let out a huff of exasperation. "I had to be quite creative about escaping, but I did it."

Barley then exchanged a look with Ravenpaw, his blue eyes gleaming. "I know you'd find a way out if you were put in that situation," he then murmured. "You could never sit still."

"But that's really where you've been this entire time?" Ravenpaw then asked me, his green gaze wide with awe. "How did you even manage that?"

I let out a snort and rolled my eyes back at him. "Overall, it was quite terrible, don't get me wrong, but... the Twolegs had another housecat there," I revealed, finding that I was actually a bit reluctant to reveal this part of the story. "One... that I actually became... pretty well acquainted with."

I then actually found myself having to hold back a purr when I noticed the look that Barley was giving me – the same kind of look that I was certain that Sparrow would have given me in this situation. "*Pretty well acquainted with*, huh?"

"...Yeah..." I replied, beginning to shift back and forth awkwardly. I then tried to lighten the situation by flashing the two toms a mischievous look with a single eyebrow cocked. "Like you two, I suppose."

Barley's eyes immediately narrowed back at me, and I heard Ravenpaw let out an amused grunt. "Mhmm," Barley then murmured as he glanced back at the black tom nervously.

Goodness, I then thought. *I can feel their hot ears from here.*

"So," Barley then meowed after clearing his throat. "Who is this cat that you became so acquainted with?"

After a long sigh from me, I then proceed to give the two toms the story of the wonderful, lovely, truly kind Wendell – the tom that had appeared on that first day of me living in the Twoleg nest – pestering me and annoyingly emphasizing the fact that I couldn't escape no matter how much I wanted to. Then, of course, there was

everything wonderful and complicated that happened after that – us growing closer, me expecting Oreo, us losing Oreo, and then us working together to get me out into the world once and for all.

As I continued to talk, I found my voice growing hoarse and thick with emotion – after all, it had only been a few days since I'd left... it was all still so fresh. *And I miss Wendell just as much as I did when I first turned away from him...*

After I was done, I forced myself to close my eyes and take a deep breath, fully bringing myself back to the moment as I heard Barley let out a snort and speak. "Wow, you really like to leave your mark in these places, don't you?"

Ravenpaw then let out a gasp. "Barley!" he then yowled, sounding absolutely bewildered. He then stared back at me, wide-eyed, as I purred. "You're really okay with him saying that?"

I gave the tom a shrug. "Don't worry, it was a joke, Ravenpaw. I don't mind," I reassured him. "And it was a pretty good one too!" *And it's not like he's wrong...*

I then gave a shake of my head to try and focus myself again. "But yes... Wendell was very special, and as much as I wanted to get out of that house, it still meant so much that I got to be with him, and that we got to be a family together."

I then let out a shaky sigh. "Even if it was for such a short amount of time..."

Barley immediately gave me an understanding nod. "I'm sure it was very hard to have to leave him, Mist. I am so sorry."

He then let out a sigh, and I tried to hold back a smirk as I watched him then wrap his tail around Ravenpaw's. "And I am so, so sorry that yet another one of your kits was taken away from you. A mother can hardly stand for one of their kits to have a tiny cough... let alone..."

After the black and white tom trailed off, he gave another shake of his head. "But... Wendell said that Oreo is likely okay, right?"

I nodded quickly back at the two toms, almost wanting to reassure myself as well as them. "As much as I hate to admit it, I am pretty sure," I told them. "Wrenkit, on the other paw, I have *never* known for sure. She is the main reason why I wanted to escape – so that I could go and find her, but..."

From here, I then proceeded to tell Barley and Ravenpaw about the supposed *sign* – maybe from StarClan – I received just after I had left the house. The sign with the lilies that had swayed so abruptly in the wind, that had pointed her in the exact direction of the forest.

"I know it sounds *crazy*, but..." I continued as I finished off the story. "Something about it made me feel like I had to return to the Clans first, and then I would be able to find her, in whatever way that had to happen." A chill then ran down my spine, and a certain kind of tension and energy coming from Barley and Ravenpaw told me that they knew where my story was leading next. "So, I decided to try and find my way to ThunderClan, but... guys, it was *gone*. All of it."

I then scooted my mouse aside so that I could shift closer to the two toms. "What happened to the Clans?" I then pressed to them, my heart picking up in pace with the dread I was feeling. "Where did they go, and are they okay?"

I watched the two of them, frozen and terrified as Ravenpaw exchanged a look with Barley. "Well, Mist, while we can't be *sure*, they were at least okay the last time we saw them."

I let out a gasp and flicked my ears, a significant amount of my stress already being lifted off of my shoulders. "The last time you saw them?" I asked anxiously as I scooted even closer. "When was the last time you saw them?"

"Well, believe it or not, all four Clans came by to pay us a visit," Barley told me, to my complete bewilderment. "They actually informed us that they were going to be traveling to find a new territory because of what the Twolegs were doing to their home. They stayed with us that night, and then they trekked off the next morning."

In that moment, it seriously felt like I couldn't hear better news *ever*. I now was certain that I would have some sort of home to return to. "Oh, thank goodness!" I practically cried out. "I can't even begin to describe to you all how scared I was that the Twolegs had buried all of them alive..."

"Oh, me too, Mist!" Ravenpaw replied after we all purred. "Not long before they ended up here, I had wanted to travel to ThunderClan's camp to check on them, but Barley wouldn't let me."

I let out a look, flashing Barley a teasing look. "He's a buzzkill, that Barley."

"Tell me about it!" Ravenpaw purred. He then let out a sniff as Barley pushed against the black tom's head with his paw. "But anyway, from what I can remember, none of the Clans had any idea of where they were going, but as always, they trusted StarClan to lead the way."

"Their bravery truly astounded me, but I expected nothing less from them," Barley meowed. He then let out a sigh and shook his head. "It was then that they told us that they *still* hadn't found a trace of you, and actually..."

The black and white tom then flashed Ravenpaw what looked like a solemn, sympathetic look. "That was when they also told us that Graystripe had been snatched away by Twolegs too."

My mouth immediately dropped at those words. Graystripe, as in my Clanmate? As in ThunderClan's deputy? "...No way," I breathed, truly at a loss for words for a moment. *Wow, me being stolen really was just the beginning of all of the Twoleg chaos*. "That is absolutely horrible. How was Firestar holding up with that information? Had he named another deputy?"

Ravenpaw then let out a long sigh. I then felt a large twinge of sympathy for him, realizing that he had been just as close with the deputy as Firestar was. "As I had expected, he didn't want to jump to... *any* conclusion too quickly," the former Clan cat answered. "He hasn't named a new deputy yet, to my knowledge."

"Wow..." *Things have changed so much since I left*. "How... how long ago was it that they were here?"

Barley thought for a moment. "Oh, moons ago, I have to admit," he revealed, to my disappointment. "If they weren't all trampled by Twolegs or swept away in some mountains, I would expect that they have been in their new territory for quite a while now."

"I see..." I murmured as I slowly nodded my head. "And you both have no idea how far away they are... at all?"

Ravenpaw gave me an apologetic look as he shrugged. "Unfortunately not."

I then let out the dejected sigh that I'd been holding in for quite a few heartbeats now. "Well, darn..." I then murmured in a voice just barely above a whisper, my heart seeming to sink into the hay below. "They could be worlds away then, couldn't they?"

I then gave Barley a confused look, noticing his blue eyes narrowing out of my peripheral. "And when has that ever stopped you, Mist?" he then asked me.

I narrowed my eyes right back at him. "Hm?"

"You want to return to ThunderClan, don't you?" he then pressed. He then let out a sniff. "When has a bit of travel or adventure or some extra work *ever* stopped you from following your heart?"

I then furrowed my eyebrows, truly pondering the question. "Well, absolutely *never*, but..."

I then closed my eyes for a moment as a realization I'd been trying to block out during this entire visit came to the forefront of my mind. "If they're that far away... will I ever be able to come back here again?"

Barley also seemed to have tried to avoid that question, also closing his eyes for a moment as he seemed to fight emotion, or showing it in front of me. "Maybe. Maybe not. Who knows what life will bring?" he then meowed to me warmly.

He then sat down in front of me, letting out a snort. "I had no idea that one fateful day three nomadic cats would stumble into my barn, giving me an opportunity to share some of my mine, give them shelter when they needed it..."

He then gave me a nudge on the shoulder with his tail. "Teach their kit how to hunt, and teach their kit about the wonderful, strong Clans that are out there?"

I then could hardly stand to watch as the black and white tom let out another sigh – a shakier one this time. "Even if this is the last time we see each other, Mist, it is just an honor for me to know that after all of the traveling you've done, I helped you finally find that place that you call home."

He then shrugged. "And hey, if by some craziness you decide that the Clans aren't for you, and you crave the adventure that you and your parents once had..." He then glanced back at Ravenpaw, who was staring back at Barley with glowing eyes. "We'll be here to give you mice and let you rest for the night."

My legs were now practically shaking from how overwhelmed with emotion I was. I couldn't even speak. "But for now," Barley then went on, "I think we can at least give you some idea of where the Clans went. Do you remember which direction they started in, Ravenpaw?"

Ravenpaw thought for a moment before giving an enthusiastic flick of his ears. "They were heading towards Highstones, weren't they?"

I couldn't reply for a moment, still having to take some time to contain myself as a result of Barley's words, but luckily, Ravenpaw's eventually hit. "...Highstones? Okay!" I tried to meow more enthusiastically – however, my excitement was genuine, so it wasn't hard at all. "I've been there with Chrissy and Sparrow, but not beyond, I will admit."

"And that's okay! I know you can do it," Barley meowed to me, giving me an encouraging flick on the ear with his tail. "From there, I believe they were making their best attempt to follow the setting sun. Does that sound about right, Ravenpaw?"

"That's what Brambleclaw told me!" Ravenpaw immediately replied with a single sharp nod.

I let the toms' words further process, narrowing my eyes as I tried to picture my path. "Past Highstones, towards the setting sun... right."

I then flicked my ears, my picture of my travels becoming more vivid as I realized all of the things I'd been able to see beyond the Highstones, just from the view I had there. "Goodness... there's a *huge* Twolegplace and some mountains in that direction, aren't there?"

Barley let out an amused sniff. "You really are a traveler," he purred to me. "But yes, I've heard talk of both of those places."

"Okay..." I meowed as I nodded, excitement and determination bubbling up inside of me as my future path became a bit more certain – just certain enough. "You know what? I'll decided which I want to take one I get there."

Then, as all of us shared *mrrows* of laughter, I then felt a big, violent rush and desire for adventure rush through my blood and bones. "But for now, I have a wonderful starting point," I meowed before flashing a grateful look to both of the barn cats. "Thank you both so, so much."

I then let my gaze rest on Barley a bit longer, now having to keep myself from letting out a wail of grief. But at the same time, I felt like I was about to explode with how much warmth and gratitude I felt just by looking at him. *Thank you for everything*, I then thought as I began to back away.

So, of course, I was surprised when Barley's eyes widened once again, his ears seeming to flick in surprise. "Whoa, what do you think you're doing?" he then meowed.

I could do nothing but blink back at the tom for a moment. "Well... I was going to begin my travel, I suppose."

"Heck, no!" Barley then exclaimed.

"No?" I then asked in bewilderment.

"Come on, Mist, while it's still in my control, I insist that you stay the night," Barley meowed, his eyes gleaming with a lightheartedness that I hadn't immediately noticed before. "The sun was well set by the time you got here, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but-"

"Please," Barley then urged to me. He then gave me a wink. "It's only routine, you know."

I then had to close my eyes for a moment, now overwhelmed with so many feelings of nostalgia. "It really is, isn't it?" I sighed. Goodness, and with this being the last time I'll... I don't even want to think about it right now... how could I even think of leaving so quickly?

"Absolutely," Barley then meowed warmly, then gesturing to the mouse and the hay still on the ground. "Please, take a rest and get something to eat. I can't imagine you've had any time to relax in a long, long time."

He could not be more right.

I gave the tom a slow nod. "As a matter of fact, no," I replied, bringing myself to settle back down on the ground. "No, I haven't at all."

"I thought so," Barley murmured to me as he also lied down with Ravenpaw on the hay once again. "Rest here tonight, finish your mouse, and tell us more about your adventures since you've last seen us."

I then had to blink back emotion in my eyes as the black and white farm cat let out a shaky sigh. "Then, we'll walk you over to Highstones tomorrow morning."

Chapter 40

[image]

I woke up early, the first light of dawn just beginning to filter through the trees as Barley and Ravenpaw escorted me out of their barn. The morning air was cool and crisp, a perfect start for what I knew would be a long day.

A long day, but nevertheless, one that brought me so much hope, and after so much strife, the beginning of a life I wanted to live, in a place I wanted to be in.

Ravenpaw, Barley, and I chatted together for the entirety of the travel over to Highstones – speaking as lightheartedly and excitedly with each other as if we were going to be taking on this entire journey together.

So, to say that I was sad when I saw those tall stone peaks in the distance, was quite the understatement. I don't know how I managed to give the two, especially Barley, my goodbyes without letting out a wail of complete agony.

But it was as Barley had said last night – he was the one who had only fed into my fascination into the Clans, and without his kind words about them, I highly doubt I ever would have found my way there. Now, he was sending me their way again, and that meant so much to me. Ravenpaw, who still clearly had the heart of a Clan cat to me, had also been such an amazing support to me and had been nothing but kind and encouraging.

Those two toms were truly two of the kindest cats I'd ever come across, and Barley – I'd practically grown up with him. *He is family*, I then thought to myself. *I can be sure that Chrissy and Sparrow would agree.* Those two would take over a huge piece of my heart for the rest of my life.

But for now, I had to focus on something else they had given me - Ravenpaw and Barley had given me directions, and it was time to

follow them. *And StarClan forbid I don't get myself ridiculously lost,* I told myself before shrugging. *But then again, that's never been a problem for me.*

After several moments of sitting in the Highstones clearing, simply staring off at the place that the two farm cats had disappeared, I finally let myself take a stretch, feeling the familiar stiffness in my legs.

I had to admit, age was starting to catch up with me, and my latest adventures had definitely made that apparent. Don't get me wrong - I was no elder yet. Far from it. However, I'd lived a life full of adventures and hardships, to say the *least* that definitely have aged me a little more quickly than the average cat.

And I definitely was no average cat, and I think anyone would attest to that – not to brag, but I was certain that few cats could say they'd lived the kind of life I had. With the loner, nomadic, BloodClan, ThunderClan, and kittypet lives I'd gone through, there wasn't much I hadn't faced, and I truly felt ready for whatever lay ahead.

And even if it was something new, I had been built to deal with it, from the very beginning of my life.

And all of this circulated in my mind as I took a deep breath, not looking behind me at all as I pushed myself to push past the Highstones, and proceed in the direction that Barley and Ravenpaw had given me.

And despite all that I knew I could take on, the next few days had been anything but easy. I'd encountered more than my fair share of challenges, sadly.

Just after two days, I'd run into a group of cats that were just on the outskirts of the Twolegplace that I'd known I'd run into. And to say the least, they weren't too happy to see me. They'd tried to chase me off, but I stood my ground, maybe fluffed my fur a bit, maybe had given them a piece of my mind. I wasn't looking for a fight, but as always, I wasn't about to let anyone push me around either. After living in BloodClan, and dealing with a cat with Scourge on a daily

basis, this was *nothing*, and I knew I had to stand up for myself.

After a tense standoff, they backed down, and I continued on my way.

Not long after that, after I'd managed to navigate through the large Twolegplace full of what felt like countless Twoleg nests, I had a run-in with a fox, believe it or not. It had been lurking in the underbrush, probably thinking I'd make an easy meal. But a well-placed swipe of my claws sent it running. My heart had raced, adrenaline pumping through my veins, but I came out of it unscathed, thank StarClan.

It was just another reminder that I was still strong, still capable.

And weirdly, as I traveled, it almost felt like something was guiding me. Every time I came to a crossroads or a difficult decision, I'd get a sense of which way to go. It wasn't even a voice who spoke words to me or anything, just a weird sense of certainty that made my fur tingle any time that I came to a decision.

It was strange, but comforting, of course.

And as I had expected, it truly felt like Chrissy and Sparrow were with me during the entirety of my travels. Sure, while I was wandering as I used to all of that time ago, I actually had a destination I was seeking out.

And while this destination still wasn't something I was sure of, I still felt like I was traveling with purpose for the next few days after that – strangely, after I'd traveled through the Twolegplace, my routes had been fairly danger-free, only having to avoid some loner cats or some farm animals that didn't seem to fond of my presence.

And by the time I arrived to a small horse stable, the sun had climbed high in the sky. It was peaceful and quiet, but at the same time, something about this area felt full of life.

Beyond the stables, I felt my mouth drop open as I caught sight of the large, beautiful lake that glittered with the sunlight. Truthfully, the sight of it took my breath away. It was huge, the water so clear

it looked like glass, reflecting the sky and the trees around it.

And just like I had so many different times during my travel, I felt that strange sense of certainty, now stronger than ever. My aching legs suddenly seemed to subside, and the smallest, lightest breeze brushed my long fur.

This was it. I could feel it deep in my bones.

As I stood there, taking it all in, I then let out a gasp as something else then seemed to brush both sides of my fur – but this time, it wasn't the wind.

While I couldn't see anything on either side of me, I was almost certain that I could feel a cat standing on each side of my flank – one of the cats smelled of lavender, her fur shorter and sleek, and the other with longer fur with the comforting smell of the forest grass.

And in that moment, it felt like Chrissy and Sparrow were here with me. Their whispers floated on the breeze, telling me I'd found the right place.

I then found myself having to blink back emotion as I looked out over the water. I felt a wave of joy and relief wash over me. *This is where I'm meant to be*, I then told myself. *The Clans are here.*

It was like coming home, but better.

As I stood there, the words that had been with me since the beginning of my life, the ones that Sparrow had always tried to put into my head suddenly began to echo. *After all of the "can'ts" that I thought were in me, and after all that I've been through, I must have experienced some "cans" if it means I am able to find my way here.*

My heart felt warm, and as if it were about to float up to the fluffy clouds above, knowing that every challenge, every step, had led me here. This was my new beginning, and I was ready for it.

With a contented sigh, I settled down by the water's edge, feeling more at peace than I had in so, so long.

I thought about the life I'd lived and the journey that had brought me to this moment. I remembered the days as a loner with Chrissy and Sparrow, wandering the woods, finding my way through life on my own terms.

Then there were the years with BloodClan, a time of constant struggle and survival. I'd learned to be fierce, to fight for what I needed, as tough as that time had been

And finally, my time with the Clan, where I'd found a sense of belonging and purpose. Each phase of my life had prepared me for this moment.

I sat by the lake for a long time, just soaking in the serenity of the place. The water lapped gently at the shore, the sound soothing and calming. I knew I'd found my new home. This was where I could start fresh, build a new life, and honor the memory of those I'd loved and lost.

As the sun began to set, casting a golden glow over the lake, I finally brought myself to stand up and walk along the lake. I felt the most amazing feeling of excitement as the familiar scents of the Clans began to flow into my nostrils. Being reunited with my new family was just moments away, and soon after that, I hoped that my daughter would be there too.

I had returned to my real home, and I was ready to finally leave my past behind me.

Author's Note

Oh my goodness, you all.

When I tell you that I cannot believe this is done... I cannot BELIEVE THIS IS DONE.

To give a little backstory, I actually created Mistpelt's Story on Wattpad not too long after I wrote the FIRST edition of the first book of Kittypet Clanborn - so, like 2014. Just like I did back in the day, I rushed the writing and just tried to to spit out as many half-butted chapters as I could.

But after about ten chapters or so, I didn't focus on this story, and fully focused on writing the Kittypet Clanborn arc. Even after my long hiatus between 2017 and 2020, I found that finishing Mistpelt's Story is just not what I wanted to focus on.

In fact, reading it back in 2020, it was SO bad in my eyes that I actually ended up deleting it for a while, before deciding to re-publish the bad chapters later on just so people could get a kick out of it. To be honest, I had no plans of ever writing any more of it or finishing it. I knew Mistpelt's entire backstory, and we'd dabbled into pieces of it throughout my fanfiction arc, but it just felt like an overwhelming amount of work to write all of it in a full book, let alone a super edition.

Something about this book just felt more difficult than writing my entire fanfiction arc, weirdly.

But as I've grown older, I've realized that I absolutely HATE leaving projects incomplete, and I later realized that this story had so much potential (and to be honest, I thought it would be very helpful in setting things up for the second arc of Kittypet Clanborn, hehe!).

So, even though I knew it would be a ridiculous amount of work, I got rid of the original Mistpelt's Story chapters once again and

started fresh about a year ago, and I could NOT be more thankful that I did. Not to pat myself on the back too much, but after so many years of being overwhelmed by the task of writing this book, I FINALLY HAVE DONE IT! And I'm actually much, much more proud of it than I thought I would be.

Our girl Mistpelt got her moment, and I think and hope that this story adds a bit more substance to my first arc in my fanfiction series... and hopefully also will for future books!

Okay, enough about that stuff. Now it's time to thank you all for making it this far, and being such amazing, beautiful supports of this arc. As I always say, you all are partly the reason that I still do this - seeing all of your love, excitement, and comments makes a more difficult writing task like this feel so much easier. Thank you <3

And I'm not sure if you all can recall the plans I announced I had after this book was done, but just in case, I'll say them again...

Now that Mistpelt's Story is done, I can now officially begin working on the second arc of my Kittypet Clanborn fanfiction series!!

Guys, I cannot even begin to tell you how excited I am for this. I already have a HUGE master document of plans for every single book ;) I also can't even begin to describe how excited I am to continue the stories of our girl Lilypetal, as well as Goldenshine and Swiftflight. While I am not quite sure when the first book of this series will come out, I am hoping that it will be fairly soon! I'll continue to be planning in the meantime, hehe! So, I hope you all are looking forward to that!

And with that, I'm outta here to go and mark this book as complete! Once again, thank you all so, so much for reading, and I could not be more grateful for you all <3

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345